THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

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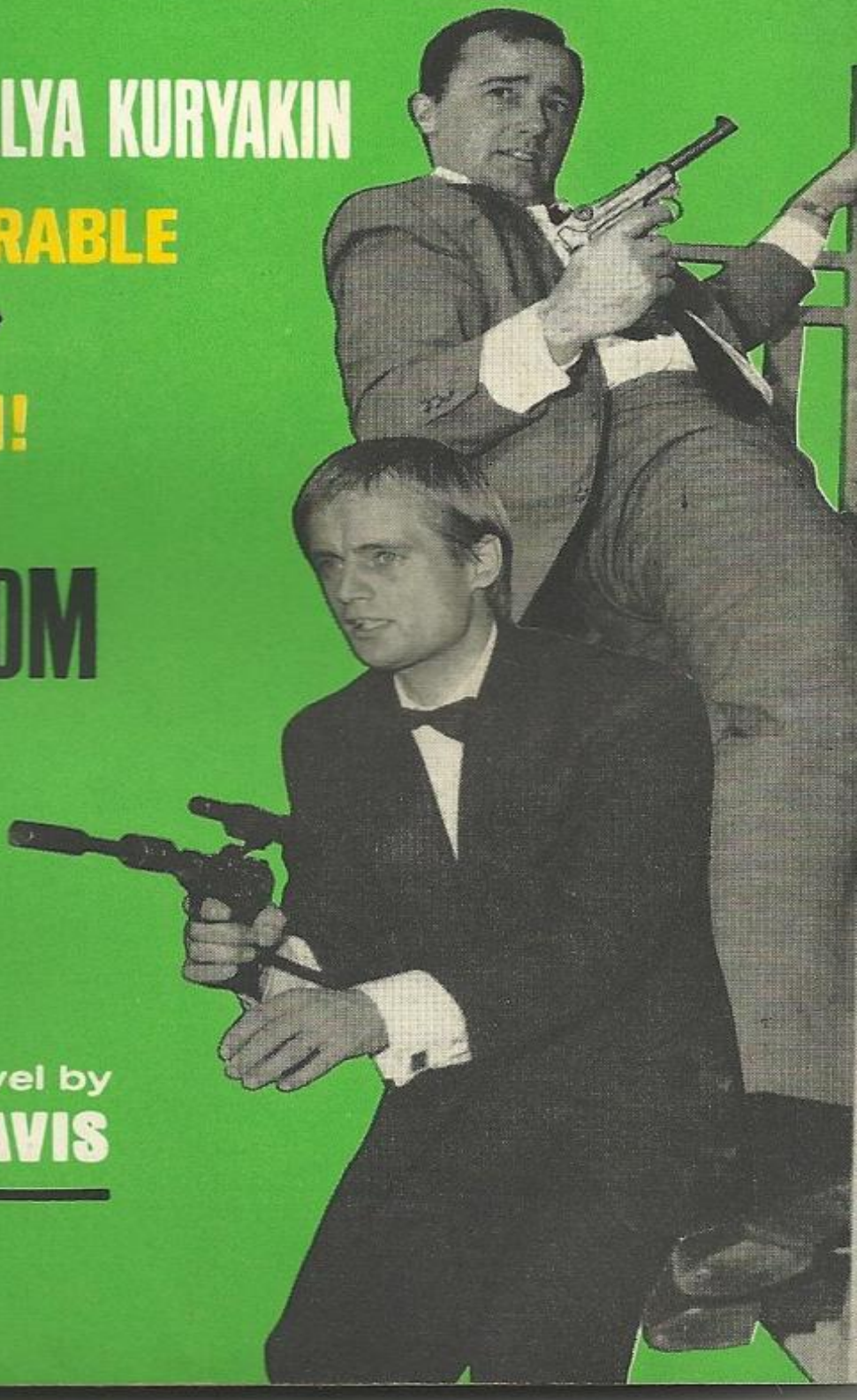
NAPOLEON SOLO ★ ILLYA KURYAKIN

THE UNCONQUERABLE U.N.C.L.E.s ARE AT IT AGAIN!

in —

THE MAN FROM YESTERDAY AFFAIR

A NEW Complete Novel by
ROBERT HART DAVIS



THE MAN FROM YESTERDAY AFFAIR

By ROBERT HART DAVIS

“There were three of us,” Waverly told Solo and Illya. “Now there is only one. You must track down, find the secret of this madman and his Apes of Death–or I will be a dead man within the next thirty days!”

PROLOGUE
MONKEY SEE, MONKEY KILL

The long dugout canoe rounded the river bend in the steaming late afternoon, going fast. The river, wide and swift here as it neared the ocean, curled back noisily, brown-foamed, from the canoe’s prow. A bright parrot, disturbed in one of the great fronded trees overlooking the river, croaked angrily and went flapping off through the jungle toward an orange shimmer of sunset light in the west.

Chop-slosh went the paddles, *chop-slosh.* It was a fast, frantic rhythm. The urgency of it matched the tense postures of the two filthy, fatigued men who were paddling as though their lives depended on it.

Their lives did.

Floating down the river behind them came shrill yells. The yells reminded Napoleon Solo, United Command for Law and Enforcement, that everything did depend on the strength left in his arms and shoulders and those of his companion, Illya Kuryakin.

Solo worked his paddle nearest the canoe prow. Illya sat in the stern. Both men were red-faced. Their skin was blistered in places by days in the intense South American sun. Beard stubble sprouted from their chins and cheeks. Illya’s hair was bleached nearly white.

The two agents sucked in great gulps of air as they slid the paddles into the water and pulled, then repeated it as they’d been repeating it for nearly an hour on the great moiling brown river.

They’d had nearly a half hour’s lead. Evidently the dead guard had been discovered at the perimeter of the secret THRUSH training barracks far

back in the jungle. Solo and Illya had been forced to dispose of the guard when he happened upon them and all their photographic gear.

They stuffed the guard's body into some palm-fronded shrubs a few yards from the electrified chain-link fence through which they'd been photographing the THRUSH installation. Then they made their way to the river and the hidden canoe.

They were just about ready to congratulate themselves on the completion of a hazardous mission when the yells began on the river behind them.

Right now the river's twists and turns hid the pursuers, who had been drawing steadily nearer to them minute by minute. But at that first contact almost an hour ago, Napoleon Solo had twisted around and stared, aghast and alarmed.

Over his shoulder he could look back along one of the river's few broad, straight stretches. Half a dozen swift outrigger canoes were putting out from shore. The U.N.C.L.E. agents spotted nearly two dozen brown men in loincloths. Spears glittered, and the naked chests of the warriors were painted. South American headhunters. The kind Mr. Alexander Waverly had mentioned to them in an offhand manner when he first made the assignment.

And directing the headhunters at their paddles was a trio of white men with pistols. Illya recognized the bush uniform of the supra-nation, THRUSH. It seemed clear that the dead guard had been found, then.

Now Solo's brow ran with sweat. It kept getting in his eyes, making it difficult for him to see. They were approaching another bend. A crocodile slid out lazily from the bank. It started to swim toward them, snapped its jaws once and darted away beneath the water, out of sight.

Solo shook his head to clear it. The paddling had become so automatic, he was hardly conscious of his motions. But his arm muscles ached with a fury that got worse every moment.

They couldn't hold this pace much longer. And ahead was nothing but a settling evening mist, humid, coiling, oppressive as all the surrounding jungle. Behind, the blood yells drifted suddenly louder. The pursuers sensed a kill.

Illya Kuryakin burst out, "The station's got to show up soon, Napoleon."

“Can’t be more than another half mile.” Solo had absolutely no facts to back that up, however.

Illya managed a thin smile. Over his left shoulder hung an old canvas bag much like an airline carry-case. Inside that bag were the sealed rolls of motion picture film for the headquarters photo analysts to study, to determine if possible how many new agents THRUSH was training on its secret drill fields bulldozed out of the jungle back there. A couple of thousand dollars’ worth of cameras and lenses had been left behind. Getting the film out was what counted.

Illya adjusted the bag strap that cut deep into the cloth of his torn shirt. “I’m glad you’re so certain we’re almost there, Napoleon.” His words were punctuated by deep gasping breaths of effort. *Chop-slosh* went the paddles, *chop-slosh.*

In truth Solo wondered whether they’d miscalculated, misread the maps. The river was taking a big bend here. But there seemed to be a slightly fresher breeze against his sunburned cheeks. The little river station where field agent Plympton was headquartered was quite near the coast.

Still, Solo could see nothing much ahead but a white fog hanging over the river. It crept out from between the steaming tree trunks on either shore. If they had indeed miscalculated and it was several miles more to the station, Solo knew they might not make it.

“Just leave it to bird dog Napoleon. I’ll find the station,” Solo gasped. “My nose never fails.”

The air dinned with yells from the out-of-sight canoes bearing down on them. How close now? A half mile? Less?

On the floor of the canoe between Solo’s muddied jungle boot lay their last weapon. The automatic pistol had accidentally dropped into the water as they launched the canoe. It was useless. Solo paddled harder.

Another sixty seconds or so and their canoe rounded a small overgrown promontory. Ahead in the mist Solo spied a rickety palm leaf structure supported on shoreline pilings. He let out a yell: “That’s it! Off there on the right, Illya. It’s–” Abruptly his jubilation died as he took in the details of the scene.

Their canoe swept in toward the little pier. The air darkened around them. Not with mist–with acrid black smoke billowing out onto the river. Only the floor platform of the shore building and a part of the wall nearest

them remained standing. A gout of orange fire shot up from this wall. Half of it fell forward into the water.

A cloud of steam boiled up. Solo was rigid in the canoe, his heart slugging, his face bleak, Illya stood up, gestured with the paddle.

“Napoleon, the helicopter’s gone.”

“It can’t be!” Solo snarled out the words.

“It is. I can see the concrete pad behind the main building.”

Solo lunged to his feet, cold terror tightening like a hand in his midsection. The current carried the canoe in toward the little jetty as Solo fought for balance, dropped his paddle, cupped his hands around his mouth, shouted: “Plympton? *Plympton!* Where are you?”

From the river behind, yells rose shrill again.

“What could have happened?” Illya cried. “If Plympton and the ‘copter are gone–“Illya didn’t need to finish. Solo knew only too well what it meant. In another five minutes, ten at most, their pursuers would be on them.

Again, Solo shouted Plympton’s name. He thought he heard a faint cry in return but couldn’t be sure. Perhaps it was the chattering of the bright tropical birds rising from the trees as the canoe bumped the jetty.

TWO

Solo dragged himself up on to the swaying, rotting wood. Sweat rivered down his chest and legs under his ripped trousers and shirt. He gave Illya a hand, noticing that his friend swayed a little. Illya was even more exhausted than he was.

Solo stumbled along the jetty and climbed the rickety ladder to the platform of the little building which had perched so neatly on the river's edge just ten days ago, when they started into the forest to search out the THRUSH training station.

He reached the top of the ladder and stood up on the platform. On his right the remaining section of thatched wall gave way and toppled into the river below. Flames were eating at the edges of the platform now. Half of the boards were already blackened.

Illya Kuryakin came up the ladder hand over hand. Together the U.N.C.L.E. agents stumbled away from the smoldering structure onto muddy ground. Ahead, Solo saw a sight which made him ill.

As Illya had said, the square concrete landing pad was empty. No 'copter waiting. And amid the oil stains Solo detected fresh bullet-marks.

The muddy perimeter around the pad showed signs of many heavy boots. The mud had been scuffed and scraped over the concrete as though a party of men had boarded the 'copter not long ago. Ahead, the station's main building, a metal Quonset, curled smoke out of its windows at either end.

The building was set at the edge of the clearing, hard against gigantic trees whose fronds cast lengthening, sinister shadows. Solo ran across the pad with Illya shambling behind. Solo tried shouting again: "Plympton?"

This time, there was a clear cry in response.

"He's alive," Illya cried. "Inside the hut–"

Stumbling forward, Napoleon Solo reached the smoke-choked door. He flung his arm over his face, ducked his head and plunged inside. In a moment or so he was able to make out details of the interior: the radio against one wall; Plympton's gun rack with two rifles still left in it; metal furniture; Plympton's cot.

The smoke boiled from the pulled-open drawers of a metal desk. Various papers and code books had been lit. Nothing else in the place was burnable. The smoke was considerable, though. And the twilight illumination outside didn't help vision any.

Calling Plympton's name, Solo walked forward. Suddenly his right boot struck something. Napoleon Solo glanced down. His belly gave a violent wrench.

"Bit me–"

The man repeated it, staring at Solo but not really seeing him. The man's eyes were bright. His bush clothing was black with perspiration. All over his body–the backs of his hands, his neck, his cheeks and forehead–black-purple patches shone moist in the gloom.

Solo dropped down on his knee. "In the name of God, Plympton, what–"

"Stay away from me!" Plympton shrieked, waving his shiny-moist hands. *"Keep the monkey."* Fever-bright eyes glared. His mouth convulsed, starting another scream.

Solo reached for Plympton's shoulder. Suddenly Illya's fingers bit into his arm. Solo twisted his head around. "What's the idea? I have to help him."

"Don't touch his skin, Napoleon. Once in a lab at the University in Novorograd I saw blotches something like those. The man's diseased."

"Diseased! He's hurt and he's alive and we've got to help him. Help me prop him up."

"Don't touch his skin!" Illya shouted. "It's some kind of plague. Believe me."

"Plague–"

Solo's mouth twisted. But caution prevailed.

Plympton's skin gave off a faintly sour, unwholesome scent. This convinced Solo that it might be wise to heed Illya's advice. He touched Plympton's arms, clamping his fingers around the man's shirt. Plympton began to moan and struggle. Illya sat on Plympton's trousers until Solo got the man propped against the metal desk. Illya shut the drawers, stifling the smoldering papers.

"There was a bottle of brandy in that packing case when we left," Solo said.

Quickly Illya fetched it. Solo managed to get some of the liquor down Plympton's throat. The U.N.C.L.E. field agent coughed, doubled over. Solo leaped away as Plympton's moistly purple cheek nearly grazed his left hand.

Finally Plympton's convulsions stopped. He banged his head back against the desk. His eyes flew open. This time they were bright, full of recognition.

"So you finally made it, chaps. Expected you yesterday. Afraid the bird's gone. Better part of an hour now." Suddenly Plympton's eyes filmed over, as if he were remembering some horror. "They came on me suddenly, don't you see? Caught me in here. Twelve, fifteen of them. They were armed. They'd stolen guns from the Isle. Trekked overland when the whole bloody business blew up on them."

Solo shook the agent by the shoulders. "Plympton, who were these men? What's this about the Isle de Mal?" Both Solo and Illya knew the name by heart. The Isle de Mal was a prison, located about twenty miles northeast. It was just off the coast of this South American country. The Isle de Mal was U.N.C.L.E.'s maximum security lock-up for THRUSH prisoners in the western hemisphere.

"There–there was a break at the Isle," Plympton gasped. "Evidently a man on the inside, one of our chaps, sold out. He took over the control tower of the landing strip there. He let a big 'copter land. Load of Thrushmen on board. They were laughing and joking about it when they came through here–"

Plympton covered his face with his hands. The backs of them glittered oily-black in the dusk. The hideous infected patches seemed to be shifting, *growing*, across the unaffected areas.

"It was a break-out y'see. Planned for months. They came for Edmonds."

As if a great bell had struck, Solo shuddered. He licked his lips, fingers turning cold around the hard glass of the brandy bottle.

"THRUSH came to break out Dantez Edmonds?"

"I didn't even know he was on the Isle," Plympton breathed.

"For about ten years now," Illya replied softly, his shadow-rimmed eyes grim.

Both he and Solo knew the name well too. Of all the terroristic killers serving the fanatic cause of THRUSH, none had been more feared than the

crazed Edmonds. When U.N.C.L.E. finally ran him to earth and caught him, it was very nearly a cause for official celebration within the organization. Something else about Edmonds nagged Solo now. His weary mind couldn't focus on it.

"What happened, Plympton?" Solo asked. "Did somebody from the Isle come here?"

Anguished, Plympton nodded. "The way I got it was–the Thrushmen were about to lift Edmonds off the Isle in their chopper. But a strong force of our guards counter-attacked. The chopper was wrecked. So the Thrushmen fought their way–"

A coughing fit halted his speech for a moment.

"–to the docks. The chap on our side, the one who sold out, knew about this station. Knew we kept a chopper here. He led them out. They stole a launch. Got to the mainland. Trekked the twenty miles or so here. Edmonds was leading them. I was on the radio when they came across the river on logs they'd cut in the forest on the other side. Edmonds–"

Now Plympton strained up again, his blotched purple cheeks shining. "His monkey–*his damned monkey*–" And once more Plympton screamed.

In the silence after the shrieks bubbled away, Illya Kuryakin rose and nodded. Solo heard.

More yells on the river, quite close.

Solo ran to the gun racks. He hauled out both the rifles, checked their loads. There was a little ammunition left. One clip in each.

He tossed one to Illya, then turned back to Plympton. "Edmonds and his men stole the helicopter. Is that it?"

With a convulsive, pain-ridden nod, Plympton said "Yes."

"And this talk about a monkey–" Illya began.

"A little thing." Plympton was almost whimpering. "Little brown feller. Like the kind that run all through the forest around here. It was riding on Edmonds' shoulders. He had a muzzle on it. A leather muzzle. While his men got the 'copter ready, he kept me in here, yelling at me, telling me how he was going to get back at U.N.C.L.E. because they'd locked him away five long years. Then he babbled something about haw he was going to do it, and–and he slipped the monkey's muzzle. The thing jumped to my shoulder. It bit me. *It bit me–*"

Plympton's screaming began again, as though he were re-living the scene. He flailed the air with his purple-wet hands.

Solo tried to speak to him, get his attention. Plympton couldn't hear. He was staring at his own disfigured hands, twisting them back and forth in front of his face.

"Half an hour after the thing bit me, my hands started to turn. Like this. *Like this.* All black and purple, sticky. I hurt inside." Plympton's mouth wrenched again. He lifted his grisly, disfigured face in mute helplessness. "What's wrong with me? *Why does it hurt the way it does?* The monkey bit me. I–I tried to run but I wasn't fast enough."

Plympton's eyes glazed again. He batted the air as he tried to rise. *"Keep it away from me, Edmonds. Keep it away from me!"*

Plympton gained his feet, flailed the air. Then, as if he were a balloon that had suddenly been pricked, he crumpled.

Napoleon Solo bent over him. Gingerly he rolled the man onto his back. Plympton's cheeks crawled with the sour-smelling slime.

"Dead," Solo said.

"Of a plague," Illya stared at Solo, bleak-eyed. "A plague carried by Dantez Edmonds."

Then it clicked into place, a final horror that battered Napoleon Solo's mind with brutal force. "Now I remember, Illya. Edmonds was caught by three of the top men in Policy and Operations. That Indian fellow. One of the European execs. And Mr. Waverly."

"And now perhaps the worst madman in all of THRUSH's filthy history is free and looking for his tormentors. Is that what you're thinking?"

"Yes," Solo said. "Yes, looking for Mr. Waverly. I never met Edmonds. I saw his pictures. Heard stories of the way he killed men–"

Another shudder worked along Napoleon Solo's spine, and a sense of enormous peril settled over him in that precise second. On the floor, Plympton's cheeks still crawled with a moist, grotesque life all their own. Even though he was dead, the blotchiness was spreading across his undiseased skin.

Napoleon Solo thought of Mr. Waverly, of the desperate necessity to warn him. Gunfire sounded from the riverfront. Yells ripped the dusk

Solo remembered the pursuers then. He ran to the door of the Quonset, jacking loads into the rifle chamber.

"Try the radio, Illya. They may not have knocked it out if they were in a hurry to escape. Try to call the Isle. Maybe they can send some men cross country.

A shadow shifted down by the burning building on the shore. Solo flung the rifle to his shoulder.

Illya started throwing switches on the big shortwave. A dial lit. Another. He called exultantly to Solo but Solo didn’t hear. He was too busy pumping shots at the first of the painted men who came howling across the concrete ‘copter pad in the red dusk.

ACT I

THREE’S A CROWD–OF VICTIMS

“And there was one clip left for Illya’s rifle,” said Napoleon Solo, “and a lot more of them than us still howling and jabbering down by the burning hut on the river. That’s when the squad that came cross country from the Isle showed up.”

Remembering, Illya Kuryakin looked grave. “Lady Luck not only smiled, she positively ginned from ear to ear. If Plympton’s radio hadn’t been working–” He shrugged rather casually.

A bitter wind whined at the window panes. Too chill, too sharp for this early in the year. Solo sat in one of the largest, most comfortable chairs in the room, one leg hooked over the arm. His $75 hand-lasted English shoe swung back and forth. He stared moodily out the window at the towers of Manhattan gilded by the thin sunset light falling out of the western murk of New Jersey.

Fatigue-shadows stained his eye sockets, marring his dashing, sophisticated good looks. His dark eyes seemed to brood. His impeccable white shirt showed half inch of expensive linen at the cuffs of his smartly cut dark hopsack suit. His clothes did a neat job of concealing the fact the he and Illya had arrived back in the U.S. less than twelve hours earlier.

They came in on an U.N.C.L.E. relay jet that shuttled back and forth to Sao Paulo. Aboard was the third member of their party. This third, quite dead U.N.C.L.E. agent was now down in the laboratory-morgue.

Solo’s mind kept returning to him. Again and again he saw that crawling, livid, horror of a blotched face.

“Ah, Plympton,” murmured Mr. Waverly. “A brave man. Outstanding record.”

Illya strode back and forth. He turned at Waverly’s last word. He looked his usual bookish, introverted self. His blond hair fell nearly to his blue eyes. He wore charcoal slacks, a madras jacket and soft white shirt, but the civilized clothing only accented the burned, peeling rawness of his skin.

“You’ve seen him , sir?” Illya asked.

“Of course,” replied Alexander Waverly. “The moment you contacted me two days ago from down there to say that Edmonds had escaped–”

Abruptly Solo sat up. “Sir, all the rest of the night on the river we didn’t have a chance to report. It wasn’t until we reached Sao Paulo next morning by ‘copter that I used Channel D. Do you mean to say word of Edmonds escaping hadn’t reached you until then?”

Waverly nodded. He was a middle-aged, unkempt man with a long, sad face. His hair was the neatest thing about him, combed down on one side from a precise part. He wore now, as always, exquisitely baggy Harris tweeds. He played with the stem of his perpetually cold pipe as he faced the pair of agents.

As chief of Section I, Policy and Operations, Mr. Waverly always looked something like an anachronism. He would have fitted the role of aging, benevolent schoolmaster. But his outward appearance and manner hid a man both incredibly tough and tough minded, as demonstrated by the way he spoke now. Quietly, about a subject which would have given lesser men a slight case of nervous hysteria.

“Naturally, Mr. Solo, the Isle de Mal flashed instant word of Edmonds’ escape. But that was late on a Friday evening. My wife and I hadn’t enjoyed a short holiday–oh, in two years, I suppose. We drove into Connecticut on Friday. It wasn’t until Saturday morning that the one courier who knew my whereabouts located us. And even he did not know the nature of the emergency. Consequently, it was your astonishing calm voice which informed me when I reached headquarters that Edmonds had broken free. There’s already been a security shakeup at the Isle. That doesn’t alter the fact that one of the vilest, most diabolical clever assassins who ever worked for THRUSH is now at liberty. Dantez Edmonds–”

Turning, Waverly walked to the window. He looked out over the buildings melting into the twilight. He shook his head.

“I go away a short time and *he* has to be the one to turn up. Dreadful irony. A man out of the past. I thought we’d finished with him.”

“Have any of the other operatives in the network picked up word of him?” Illya asked.

“No. He’s vanished.” There was an odd, almost unpleasantly humorous light in Waverly’s eyes which Solo didn’t like. Nor did he understand it. What kind of macabre secret joke was Waverly keeping from them?

“Has the lab had any luck with Plympton’s remains?” Illya wanted to know.

“Not so far,” was Waverly’s answer. “Sufficient to say that he was the victim of a rather new and virulent strain much like those responsible for the dread plagues during the Middle Ages. Only this tropical strain was–”

“–carried by the monkey Edmonds had with him,” Solo put in.

Waverly tick-ticked his pipe against the sill. “Not precisely what I was going to say.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Correct, in any case,” Waverly added. “If I seem to be holding something from you two, I am.”

“You have some information about this plague strain?”

“I do, Mr. Solo. But in the interests of not repeating myself, I shall wait until our two guests come round. They’re conferring with Dr. Bruno of data processing. I had them flown in the moment I learned of Edmonds’ escape.”

A curious air of tension descended over the room. Both Solo and Illya knew that two high-level U.N.C.L.E. executives were in New York. These men held a rank equal to Mr. Waverly’s, occupying posts similar to his in other parts of the world. One was Mr. Mohandus Bal, from the populous Asian state of Purjipur. The other, Sir Blightstone Jurrgens, operated out of U.N.C.L.E.‘s European branch. Napoleon Solo had met Bal once at a reception. He had only seen photos of Jurrgens.

But he knew quite well that Waverly, Bal and Jurrgens, operating as a team, had personally captured Dantez Edmonds in the sub-cellar of a winery near Munich, Germany, some years ago.

Solo had once heard Waverly tell the story of how six men had been required to subdue Edmonds. He had been carried, shrieking and writhing, out to a steel-lined automobile. This maximum security car drove him to the seacoast. From there a plane relayed him to London, and a jet with fourteen guards aboard watched over him on the flight to South America and the Isle de Mal.

In his day Dantez Edmonds had been that feared, respected. *A monster of a man,* weren’t those the words Waverly had used?

The tension tightened up a notch in the room where lights winked and shadows gathered.

A staff girl entered. She handed Illya a blue flimsy. Solo skewered his neck around, admiring the girl’s neat shape and trim legs. Illya handed him

the sheet. He scanned it without really seeing it. He thought half-heartedly about asking the girl's name. He was temporarily at liberty, had a few days of holiday coming. Perhaps–

Illya coughed, tapped the flimsy.

"Oh. Oh yes, just getting to it," Solo said.

He read rapidly. At least their South American mission had paid off. The flimsy said an U.N.C.L.E. strike force had attacked and eradicated the secret THRUSH training center. The photos he and Illya had taken had blueprinted the most feasible entry routes, and only one man had been wounded in the takeover.

Solo laid the flimsy aside. "Good news." The words fell, sepulchral, into the silent room.

The room was Mr. Waverly's private office and command center. It was equipped with computers, built-in monitors and a large, circular, motorized conference table which revolved at the touch of a button. Few outsiders had ever seen the room. Fewer still of the eight million plus people in New York were even aware that it existed.

This headquarters room was the strategic center of the entire Manhattan complex of U.N.C.L.E. which was hidden away behind the facades of a row of buildings a few blocks from the United Nations enclave in the city's East Fifties. The buildings consisted of an out-sized public parking garage, four dilapidated brownstones and a modern three-story whitestone.

The first two floors of the whitestone were occupied by an exclusive key-club restaurant, The Mask. On the third floor were sedate offices. These, a front, belonged to U.N.C.L.E. They inter-connected with the maze of steel corridors and suites behind the decaying fronts of the brownstones.

There were four known entrances to the three-story U.N.C.L.E. complex. One was through the third floor offices in the whitestone, another through a carefully contrived dressing room in Del Florio's Tailor Shop on the level just below the street.

Within U.N.C.L.E. headquarters proper, four elevators handled all vertical traffic. And inside the steel-walled rooms where signal lights of amber, purple, green, red, royal blue, and orange blinked constantly in coded sequences worked a crack cadre of alert young men and women of many races, creeds, colors and national origins.

The equipment installed for their use was the most sophisticated modern technology could devise. It included high-powered shortwave antennas and

elaborate receiving and sending gear hidden away behind a large neon advertising billboard on the roof. These resources, utilized by the organization's top agents in Operations and Enforcement–men like Solo and Kuryakin–stood between the world and the collapse of a delicate balance of terror. Should the balance tip, THRUSH would soon step in to claim the spoils.

And it seemed to Napoleon Solo as he brooded in the gathering twilight that with the return of Dantez Edmonds, the balance had tipped ever so little in favor of the other side.

"Ah," said Waverly. "Our associates are arriving."

A lighted display panel above a doorway flashed scarlet, then cleared to white. The heavily fortified and padded steel door slammed aside with a soft thud. Two men came into the room. They paused on the other side of the circular conference table. Mr. Waverly cleared his throat, adjusted a rheostat. The light level came up sufficiently to compensate for the deepening of darkness outside.

"Sir Blightstone, Mohandus–all finished, are you?" Waverly asked. "Quite."

The Asian, a small, bright-eyed brown man in a turban of sparkling white silk, spoke first. He had a wry little face, almost bird-like in its forward-thrusting curiosity. But his eyes were shrewd. Solo and Illya stood up. Solo judged Mohandus Bal to be nearing his mid-fifties. Except for the graying of the eyebrows, he would have passed for a man much younger.

Bal wore a western suit obviously cut by a fine British tailor. His turban was his only concession to his country of origin. He gave a swift, darting look of instant recognition. Then he turned back to Waverly.

"Dr. Bruno was most cooperative. We expedited discussion of the problem and arrived at what we both feel is a workable solution."

"Bruno's preparing a report," Sir Blightstone Jurrgens rumbled. "You'll be receiving a copy, naturally. I think we'll all find that this new programming technique Bruno has worked out will speed the transmission of the kind of information we all need."

"I'm delighted the timing of your visit allowed us to iron out that little inefficiency," Waverly said. *Tick-tock* went his pipe against the table's rim. On the faces of the computers set into the walls, lights flashed in eerie silence. "Of course we are all aware that the conference just concluded was but an incidental detail. We are met for a more serious purpose. One which

can only be said to be unpleasant. By the way, permit me to introduce Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin. I am sure you know them by reputation, if not personally."

Handshakes were exchanged. Sir Blightstone was an immense-chested bull of a man well over six feet. He brushed at his guardsman's mustache and rumbled in his throat about the good work Solo and Illya had done in a recent European affair involving a notorious THRUSH killer named Count Beladrac. Bal responded politely when Solo reminded them of their reception meeting a few years ago. Sir Blightstone thumped the table at the conclusion of the formalities:

"Damned right this is unpleasant. The day-to-day battle with THRUSH is time consuming enough. Takes all our resources. Top men. Stretched thin, too. Now this–"

Again Blightstone harrumphed. He had a tendency to interrupt his speech with this deep-throated gargle, as if he were constantly reacting to a series of minor irritations. Solo might have raised a cynical eyebrow, but he knew better. No fool, no Colonel Blimp, no British caricature-man could ever have risen to Jurrgen's position in U.N.C.L.E. Once you looked past the stout man's facade you saw tiny, keen blue eyes pinning you, evaluating you, thinking every moment.

Jurrgens rumbled on, "It's not as if I care a fig for the personal danger. Doubt it even exists, really. But with THRUSH pressing on so many fronts, to be burdened with what at first blush appears to be a personal vendetta– annoying!"

"Nor I," answered Waverly. "We all remember Edmonds, I'm sure."

"Too well," Bal murmured. "Psychopathic. But clever. Ah, almost too much so."

"His intense dedication to THRUSH," Waverly said, "coupled with years of confinement and his personal animosity toward the three of us–" A gesture to the other two executives. "They pose a peril of considerable magnitude. I do not enjoy employing two of my best agents as bodyguards–" Here a slow, significant look at Illya and Solo. The latter was mystified by the references to personal danger.

Waverly continued: "– and I hope I do so not out of any private desire to shield myself. But facts are facts. The three of us from Section I in this room represent three-fifths of the executive branch of U.N.C.L.E. Let us

say, Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin, that in accepting your new assignment, you are not serving us so much as you are the offices we hold."

Nervously Illya brushed at the clipped bangs hanging down over his forehead. "Forgive me, sir, but I don't understand."

"We've received threats," said Bal. His face was a model of Oriental repose. His fingers were tented. But his small, dark eyes carried worry in them.

"Personal threats," Sir Blightstone said.

"We each received them shortly after you reported the escape, Mr. Solo," said Waverly. He reached into the pocket of his tweeds and pulled out a folded yellow sheet of paper. "These messages were transmitted simultaneously. Mine came from Bonn, Germany. Sir Blightstone's came from Tokyo. Mr. Bal's came from Capetown.

"Naturally it was useless to try to trace them. Edmonds was clearly using the THRUSH apparatus to serve his ends. By the time the messages were sent, he'd probably gone to ground somewhere. They all came in as straightforward cables."

The paper rattled faintly as Waverly extended it. "Same message to each of us."

A little sliver of fear dug into the back of Napoleon Solo's neck as he took the paper and turned it so that shimmering green lights from the face of nearby computer illuminated the narrow message strips pasted on the yellow sheet. A teleprinter had typed out the words in block letters:

TO THE THREE WHO IMPRISONED ME–I HAVE A LONG MEMORY. AND HAVE LIVED FOR THIS MOMENT. THE GREAT DUMAS HAS SET THE PATTERN SO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE TO EXPECT. ONE BY ONE. DEATH. ONE BY ONE. BUT YOU WILL NOT KNOW WHEN OR HOW UNTIL THE MOMENT. IT IS MY DEDICATION. ONE BY ONE.

The last three words were repeated several more times. They had a kind of silent drumbeat finality in Solo's inner ear as he read them. He glanced finally at the simple signature.

A block capital D.

Looking over Solo's shoulder Illya sniffed. "Rather theatrical, ringing in Dumas."

"Edmonds always did have a touch of the histrionic about him," said Bal.

“Which one has to overlook,” Sir Blightstone said, “Else one tended to regard him as a mountebank, a fool. According to his dossier, his father and mother were traveling players in the provinces of France.”

“Exactly how was he captured?” Illya asked.

To the younger agents, Mohandus Bal explained, “We were in your section then. Operations and Enforcement. We three were all assigned to Madrid. The informer’s tip came and we rushed–ah, but that is documented in U.N.C.L.E. files. Read it at your leisure. Alexander here was actually the one who got the line on the informant. We were good friends, and we wanted the prize for ourselves, so we closed in as a group. We called up reinforcements only at the last moment, Edmonds was so hysterically averse to being captured alive that only massive forces of men could keep him from killing himself. Rather ironic, isn’t it? Years in our maximum security prison on the Isle de Mal have instilled in Dantez Edmonds, as the saying goes, a rage to live?”

“And kill,” said Illya into the silence.

Darkness had fallen in Manhattan. The skyscrapers gleamed, lonely and lost. A whole normal, conventional world out there, Solo thought. Separated from us only by a few panes of glass.

But a lot more separated the rest of the world from U.N.C.L.E., including the dedication to a fight that never stopped, no matter how tired the fighters, or how bloodied or how hopeless they felt.

Solo tried to throw off the sense of impending disaster by watching Mr. Waverly click his pipestem against his teeth and smiled.

“It *would* be typical of Edmonds to strike the grand pose and characterize himself after the hero of the Dumas novel.”

“There is, however,” said Illya “A subtle difference. The Count of Monte Cristo was wronged by three evil men. He came back from the past to revenge himself. In this case the count is also the wrong-doer.”

Solo found himself speaking with an edge of annoyance that betrayed his tension: “Literary allusions are all very nice, gentlemen. Let’s get down to practicalities. Edmonds had sworn to kill all three of you. So you need protection. But unless you all plan to stay here in Manhattan, together, under guard–”

“Impossible,” said Jurrgens. “I’m flying home tomorrow.”

“The state of Purjipur faces an internal crisis,” said Bal. “THRUSH is behind it, I believe. It requires my presence.”

“Then we need fifty men, not two!” Solo exclaimed.

Waverly held up a hand. “Protection is not the problem, Mr. Solo. The real problem is this. In escaping from the Isle de Mal Dantez Edmonds took with him one of U.N.C.L.E.‘s own weapons. A weapon never meant to be used; one which, in the hands of THRUSH, could prove to be disastrous. I refer,” he added with a long, somber glance, “to that single, pestilential monkey.”

TWO

For a long moment no one stirred. Sir Blightstone Jurrgens pulled out a handsome gold cigar case. He extracted a huge brown Deluxe Corona-Corona, clipped the end with a pair of little gold scissors.

As the European placed the scissors back into the pocket of his waistcoat, Solo noted that the man's stubby fingers trembled. And on Mohandus Bal's cheeks a thin film of sweat shone, even though the air in the headquarters was kept at a comfortable and constant seventy degrees.

Of all of them, Mr. Waverly seemed the most unflapped by the escape. And by the major threat to U.N.C.L.E.'s top echelon posed by Dantez Edmonds being at liberty.

From a drawer in the circular conference table, Waverly drew a legal size manila folder. Out of this he pulled half a dozen eight by ten glossy photos which he fanned out in front of Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin craned over his shoulder. Solo studied the pictures, saw only some fairly routine shots of a laboratory. Cages for small animals were ranged along one wall.

"Look closely, please, Mr. Solo," Waverly asked. "What do you see in those cages?"

"Monkeys, sir. But what's so unusual about a lab having–"

"This laboratory," cut in Waverly, tapping the photos, "is located on the Isle de Mal. It is a small facility but one of our most important ones. Specializing in tropical medicine research."

A brightness quickened in Illya's eyes. "Yes, that's right. I recall it now."

Waverly gestured, "The lab is small and relatively obscure in comparison with our other larger installations. It's located on the Isle because the island is a prime site for testing various anti-fever and forest defoliation compounds under clinical conditions. Our men down thee have a distinguished record of coming up with chemical agents which make U.N.C.L.E. operations in tropical areas safer.

Mohandus Bal coughed to gain Waverly's attention. "Come, come, Alexander. You've dangled the hook in front of these two long enough. Tell

them straight out!” In Bal’s voice Solo heard irritation born of intense nervous strain.

“Um,” went Waverly. “Well, it’s quite simple. In doing its work, our lab on the Isle naturally turn up many dangerous compounds. One particularly virulent, plague-like strain was being tested there at the time Edmonds made his escape. It was no secret on the Isle that the lab had turned up this rather horrific strain. We assume that what happened was this. The THRUSH double agent on the Isle knew of the lab’s work. He mentioned it to Edmonds during the escape. Edmonds broke into the lab before heading overland.

Waverly’s index finger touched one of the photos again. “He smashed that very cage. From that cage he took a monkey, a test animal which had been inoculated over a period of months with small doses of the strain, thus building up its resistance and natural immunity.”

“And that,” said Solo, “is the monkey Edmonds had on his shoulder at the river station?”

“The one that bit Plympton when Edmonds unmuzzled it,” Illya added.

Sir Blightstone nodded grimly. “Exactly. I knew Plympton well. Top man. But from what I hear–God what a ghastly death. Alexander, why was the lab on the Isle allowed to muck around with such awful stuff?”

“Research is unpredictable, as you well know,” Waverly replied, a bit tartly. “Naturally our organization would not have utilized this particular strain in any way. We do not make war on our enemy, or at least we haven’t been driven to that yet. Our technical people pursue odd byways of knowledge in the hope that something positive, beneficial may turn up.” He directed a somber glance at Solo and Illya. “The point is obvious, is it not gentlemen?”

Solo stood up. Dark memories of Plympton’s blotched, purple-moist face stirred in clotted back corners of his mind.

“Yes, sir. Edmonds recognized the value of this plague strain to THRUSH. He tried it on Plympton and it worked. So now THRUSH has a new weapon. One of our own weapons, too, as you said. And they’ll probably use it against us.”

“Not only against us,” said Mohandus Bal. “Against the entire world. The strain is terrible enough to infect whole nations with this plague-like disease. Alexander was quite right when he said personal danger to the three of us was hardly the sole consideration. What matters most is that

Dantez Edmonds has in his possession something which could well turn the tide for THRUSH at last."

"If the monkey is still alive," said Mr. Waverly in a low tone, "and we have no reason to believe otherwise. I am informed that it carries enough of the plague strain in its tissues to kill, at minimum, two hundred thousand people. An almost miniscule dose will bring death. And the strain can be easily transmitted. Probably in Plympton's case it was carried in the saliva that accompanied the monkey's bite."

"Then we've got to find Edmonds without delay," Illya said.

"Admirable notion," responded Jurrgens. "Except for one sad fact. He's vanished."

"Has an alert been posted?" Solo asked Waverly.

"World wide, to every station. Thus far there have been no reports that he has been seen. If I were Edmonds, I would go to ground and stay there, secure in knowing that I had in my possession one of the most awful means of destruction on the face of the earth. Our hope–" Waverly's glance struck Solo and Illya like a blow "–our *only* hope is that, in his neurotic compulsion to revenge himself, he will emerge to strike at the three of us. And then we can run him to ground ourselves. No, let me change that. From can to *must."*

"It means, of course, giving him the opportunity to attack us," said Mohandus Bal.

"That, in turn" added Jurrgens, "suggests that we cannot hide. Rather, we must go about our normal duties. If work for U.N.C.L.E. can ever said to be normal."

"Permit me to say, sir," Illya spoke up, "that doesn't sound like a wise course. You three gentlemen are virtually invaluable to the organization. To present yourselves as targets is to court a disaster from which U.N.C.L.E might not recover."

Gently, Waverly smiled. "Mr. Kuryakin, I am flattered by your high appraisal of my value, and that of Mr. Bal and Sir Blightstone. There is no other way. We must continue to carry on in quite normal fashion. Minus the very kind of extra security precautions you mentioned earlier, Mr. Solo. They would simply deter Edmonds. The three of us involved with this frightful man from yesterday must in fact go out of our way to thrust

ourselves into the open, where Edmonds can reach us. Otherwise we have no route to him. No means of recovering that infected monkey."

In his mind Solo conjured a chittering vision of that little face. The imaginary monkey clawed the air, reaching, reaching out to scratch him, infect him–

The gloomy mental picture widened. He saw hundreds of the little animals running through a phantom city street. They leaped onto the shoulders of people passing by, biting them.

Then came the screams, the convulsions.

And into the scene rolled the dark tanks and belching armor from the THRUSH arsenals rolling, rolling through burning , diseased ridden cities as governments toppled–

Did you hear me Mr. Solo?" Waverly's voice intruded on the dark reverie.

Solo shook off his evil mood. "Sir?"

"Unless we turn up definite information on Edmonds' whereabouts via the world wide alert, we shall proceed along the lines outlined. Business, as the saying goes, as usual. No unusual security precautions for Mr. Bal, Sir Blightstone, or myself.

Your first assignment will be to escort Sir Blightstone to the airport for his flight back to London in the morning." Waverly glanced at his watch. "Unless there are further questions, I shall excuse you for the rest of the evening."

Ah, yes, Mr. Solo," rumbled Sir Blightstone, managing to regain some trace of good humor. "One hears that you're quite the lady's man. There's still a whole night left ahead, what?"

Wearily Solo pinched the bridge of his nose. "You'll never believe this. I do have a date. With Miss Sumuzuki. But I just don't feel up to it."

"Miss Sumuzuki," Waverly explained to the visitors, "is one of ours. A karate expert. A few lessons, Mr. Solo?"

"Just some plain old-fashioned wrestling on a love seat," said Illya Kuryakin.

His smile did nothing to cheer Solo. The levity ended the meeting on a sour, unpromising note. Solo and Illya shook hands with the visitors, and

made arrangements to meet Sir Blightstone at 7:30 in the morning, for the drive to Kennedy International.

Then the two agents left. Glumly they walked down the corridor where coded lights blinked from the ceiling. A ravishing girl wearing the triangular U.N.C.L.E. badge on her smock waved to Solo from an open doorway. Hands in pockets, brooding, he didn't even see.

The elevator arrived. The doors slid back. Illya glanced up.

"Hello, you two," he said to the couple just getting off. Both carried small airline flight bags. The girl was slender, dark-haired, attractive. The young man, he of the large smile and rumpled Saville Row haberdasher, spoke first in response.

"We're just in from Limerick. April did a smashing job of polishing off some THRUSH nasties who were peddling liquor loaded with radioactive poisons. That little kit of demolition materials she carries in her high heels fairly blew this old Irish Distillery off the earth." And Mark Slate patted the girl's shoulder in exaggerated courtliness.

Looking tired, April Dancer smiled. "I never want to smell Irish whiskey again. Where are you headed?"

"Night off," replied Illya. "I'm going to get some rest. Napoleon has a date."

"Well, top of the evening," Slate grinned, took April's arm. "We've got to file a report. Remember your duty to dear old U.N.C.L.E., Napoleon. Clear head and all that. Not too much monkey business, tonight."

Waving, Mark Slate and April Dancer went down the hall.

Napoleon Solo stared after them, bleak-faced, thinking: *There's more monkey business than you know. And it's not funny. In fact it just may be tragic.*

THREE

The weather warmed a little overnight. By 7:25 the next morning the sun was up and a brisk but balmy breeze blew through the streets of midtown Manhattan. Napoleon Solo parked the sumptuous black Chrysler limousine in the *No Parking* zone in front of the glass and curtain wall glitter of the Hotel Transamerica. He climbed out. Illya Kuryakin stepped out on the curb side.

A braid-hung doorman started toward them, scowling and lifting a white glove to instruct them to move on. Solo flipped out a pass case containing a set of artfully forged diplomatic credentials. He pointed to the diplomatic pennons fluttering on the car's front fenders. Mechanics in the U.N.C.L.E. headquarters garage three levels beneath the whitestone complex had mounted the flags in place at 6 that morning. The doorman nodded, and the agents headed into the lobby.

In two minutes Illya had completed a call on the house phone, informing Sir Blightstone that they were on their way up. While the agents took the elevator up to 22, Sir Blightstone would be removing the anti-personnel devices he had placed around his suite the night before. The simple little devices could be carried in a small pouch, and were cheaper than employing a staff of human agents to stand overnight.

As the electronically-controlled elevator whizzed upward, Solo found himself whistling. He was freshly shaved and neatly turned out in dark slacks and a sports jacket with a paisley handkerchief in the pocket. Illya noticed his cheerful mood:

"Miss Sumuzuki's workout must have agreed with you."

Solo grinned. "Exercise is beneficial. I chased her around the karate mat for an hour and never caught her once."

Laughing, Illya held the door as they stepped into the plush, dimly lit corridor that smelled of carpets and closed doors as hotels do all over the world.

"This way," Solo pointed left. "Around that bend. Jurrgens is in the suite at the very end."

The two agents walked briskly. As they rounded the corner they came upon a group of electrical workers fussing with a large circuit panel in the

wall on their left. The four repair men wore dark green slacks and shirts, and the yellow metal hard hats blazoned with the logo of the city's electric utility. Each of the workers had a wide leather utility belt carrying a collection of screw drivers, pliers and similar tools.

"I tell ya, Morris," one of the men was saying as the agents passed, "all of them short circuits couldn't have been caused by just this one board."

As Solo and Illya went by, one of the workers gave them a quick glance from under the brim of his metal hat. The man's eyes had a peculiar lackluster quality. His pupils were oddly enlarged. Solo wondered about that, and also about the necessity of having four workers concentrated on a relatively insignificant switch panel. Why wouldn't they be working on the central controls somewhere else in the hotel?

Perhaps some influential guest had complained about his lights going out. Solo gave a mental shrug. The workers continued to argue in low voices as Solo and Illya approached the ornate double doors at the hall's end.

A gold-leaf decorative motif was worked into the wood of the door. A center panel read *Excelsior Suite*. Illya rapped smartly. "I hope he's taken all the bombs off."

In a moment Sir Blightstone opened the door. He had already put on his light topcoat and bowler. His three suitcases were piled up in the foyer behind him. Sir Blightstone was just tucking the pouch of lethal little protective devices into a side pocket as he said:

"Good morning, gentlemen, good morning! All ready. Trust you're both feeling fit? Things got a little gloomy last evening, didn't they? Matters always look better after a good night's rest."

Solo slipped past him, handed one of the bags to Illya and took two himself.

"Right, sir. Trust you had a pleasant night too. Didn't lose any sleep because of the electrical failure, did you?"

"Electrical failure?" Jurrgens arched a graying eyebrow. "Didn't know there was one–"

At that precise moment three things happened.

Sir Blightstone was glancing past Illya's shoulder. Suddenly his eyes shot open wide and he dove his hand into his pocket for the pouch of little bomb devices.

Second, Illya spun to follow Sir Blightstone's gaze and let out a yell of warning.

Third–and this happened in the split seconds while Sir Blightstone and Illya were moving–Napoleon Solo realized that the workmen down the hall were no longer talking.

Silence.

Why?

Then Solo saw.

"Damn bloody *Thrushmen!"* Sir Blightstone exclaimed. "And drugged high as kites. Look at their eyes–"

Solo had very little time. The quartet of men in green twill were advancing rapidly own the center of corridor. They pulled implements from their leather utility belts. One man twisted the handle of his screwdriver as Napoleon Solo bowled against Sir Blightstone and drove him against the wall.

From the tip of the screwdriver squirted a thin, pressure-driven stream of whitish gas. Illya's hands flashed to his pocket, whipped out again and seemed to blur together. In a heartbeat's time he fitted the long muzzle onto the stock mechanism of his pistol and was throwing his arm forward to shoot.

The THRUSH quartet had their bogus tools poised. Flame belched from the head of one. Illya dropped, firing as he fell. His shot was off, plowing a channel down the corridor plaster. A bullet from an ersatz wrench blasted splinters from the suite's doorframe as Solo hammered Sir Blightstone all the way to the carpet.

On hands and knees, trying to stay beneath the streams of gas that were being shot at them, Solo struggled to fit the halves of his pistol together. Another Thrushman fired. The bullet knocked more plaster loose, threw stinging dust into Solo's eyes.

The corridor reverberated thunderously. Somewhere a female guest of the hotel began to scream. Solo's heart thudded. Red anger flowed inside him. He'd almost smelled the trap, but he hadn't acted quickly enough.

The THRUSH quartet was no more than half a dozen yards away, advancing along the walls behind the smokescreen of gas. Solo got a whiff of the stuff and grew dizzy for an instant. Tranquilizer mist, most likely. He triggered a shot. One of the phony workmen clutched his thigh and howled.

Illya was about to fire from the prone position when a door opened down the hall and a man stuck his head out. Illya pulled his shot up at the last moment. The bullet blasted harmlessly into the ceiling.

“Rotten THRUSH beggars,” Blightstone was cursing. He struggled to his knees, red-faced, trying to grab his pouch of lethal devices from his topcoat pocket. Gas squirted from one of the screwdrivers again. It caught the U.N.C.L.E. executive full in the face. With a hoarse cry Sir Blightstone slammed forward on to the carpet face first.

The THRUSH quartet swarmed down on them. Solo took a kick in the side of the head. He flopped back hard against the wall. Gas drifted into his nostrils. He felt himself going under. He tried to cry out to Illya. He couldn’t make a sound.

Two of the Thrushmen picked up Sir Blightstone Jurrgens and began dragging him down the corridor by his shoes. Solo realized they must want him alive, else they’d have killed him on the spot. Illya and Solo were left where they were, gasping feebly for air.

“Got to get after him, Napoleon,” Illya groaned in the murk. “Can’t stand up–”

Solo choked out a wordless syllable. If they stayed a moment longer in the gas-laden corridor they’d both be knocked out. The Thrushmen were disappearing toward the elevator with Sir Blightstone. Somehow Solo managed to stumble up.

He lifted one of the pieces of luggage, staggered inside the suite and hurled the bag through a window. “Look out below,” he wheezed, doubling over.

Glass crashed, and reviving fresh air swirled in.

Napoleon Solo’s lungs burned as he leaned against the sill of the window. He sucked in deep draughts of air.

In a few seconds his legs lost their wobbly feeling. He felt secure enough to turn and start for the corridor, his long-muzzled pistol clutched in his right hand. As he careened back into the hallway, Illya climbed to his feet. He was pale. He swallowed once and nodded to indicate that he was all right.

Side by side, the agents plunged down the hall in a run that grew faster with each stride. The knockout gas had been diluted by the fresh air pouring in from the suite. Only traces of it curled along the baseboards now. Fear and anger boiled together in Solo’s racing mind as he skidded around the L-

bend. Ahead, the doors of a hotel elevator were just closing in on the Thrushmen and Sir Blightstone's limp body. He and Illya charged forward again, bowling past a matronly woman in a night dress and pin curls standing in the door to a room. She screamed hysterically and beat her thighs while her eyes remained tightly closed. From other rooms other voices rose, some inquiring, some alarmed, some just plain mad.

"Couple of crazy holdup men, that's what they are," a man in pajamas yelled as he lunged out a doorway near the elevators. The man called back into his room, "Call the desk, Hilda. Tell them a–hold on you two!"

The would-be hero caught Solo's lapel. That was definitely the wrong thing to do. Solo pivoted neatly, and put a lot of his anger and frustration into his punch. The man dropped, gasping.

Illya jabbed the man in the ribs. The solid citizen tumbled backwards into his room. His wife began shrieking, adding a soprano note to the contralto of the woman in pin-curlers. Illya's snarl of rage at being delayed was audible and not very nice.

Solo stabbed the air with his gun muzzle. "They're heading up to the roof."

"Helicopter waiting, perhaps?' Illya panted as he followed Solo to the fire stairs on the run.

Solo hit the steel door with his shoulder. They started the swift climb up the remaining two flights. Solo skidded around a stair two at a time. Because of the clatter of their feet, he was unable to hear the noise of a helicopter, if one were indeed on the roof.

Finally they reached the top of the last flight. In the dimness of the stairwell Solo hesitated only an instant. Illya crowded up close. Solo rolled his shoulder, hit the door's panic bar and burst out onto the sunlit roof.

Twenty-four floors above the street, the roof of the Hotel Transamerica stretched away on either hand like a vast plain. The black composition surface of the roof had begun to give off a faintly tarry smell in the glare of the morning sun. Solo went into a protective crouch as the two agents moved down along one side of the little structure which housed the stairwell. Their shadows flickered out long and thin before them. Traffic honked and clattered far below. Cautiously Solo crept toward the corner of the stairwell house, peered around–

His mouth filled suddenly with the bitter taste of panic. Sir Blightstone Jurrgens let out an agonized scream.

"No!" The word ripped from Solo's throat as he charged forward. But his intuition told him it was already too late.

Directly ahead rose the mammoth superstructure of the gigantic electric sign which, night or noon, blazed the words *Hotel Transamerica* at the sky in dazzling white letters twenty feet high. The agents were dashing toward the sign from the rear.

They had a clear view of the steel criss-crossing which supported the huge electrified letters.

Up on that jungle-gym of steel were the Thrushmen. They struggled to get back away from the thing which hung, smoking and blackening, by its wrists.

Coldly, furiously, Solo fired twice. One of the THRUSH agents pitched off the steel and dropped to the roof, the whole left half of his face running blood. In the stiff wind, Sir Blightstone twitched and shrieked low. His hair was smoldering. The Thrushmen had fastened steel cuffs to his wrists, connected the cuffs to the upright of the gigantic electrified letter *T* in the word *Transamerica* and let an incredible concentration of electrical voltage rage through the body of the U.N.C.L.E. executive.

The remaining Thrushmen dropped to the roof. Solo saw that they wore special thick soled boots and heavy insulated gloves.

Like a man crucified, Sir Blightstone jerked back and forth. The metal cuffs held him fast to the metal of the upright T.

"The *animals,*" Illya snarled. "The filthy–"

The rest was unprintable.

Illya had just noticed the chain links which had been crudely wrapped around Sir Blightstone's left leg and then lashed around one of the struts of the sign's superstructure. Electricity was pouring into Sir Blightstone's jiggling body through the cuffs and grounding through the chain into the steel.

"Got to get him down from there!" Solo howled like a man berserk.

"It's too late," Illya shouted back.

The left foot of the U.N.C.L.E. executive slipped from the steel cross-member on which he had been standing. Sir Blightstone's other foot followed. The leg-chain yanked him up short, wrenching him grotesquely. His head hung down in an odd way. His eyes were closed. Smoke curled from the point where the metal cuffs were lashed to the upright T, and white sparks like miniature Fourth of July starbursts shot in all directions.

“He’s *dead!*” Illya cried into the wind, still struggling to restrain Solo.

“Get him down. Got to get him down from there–”

“The THRUSH birds are the ones we want now, Napoleon. Come to your senses!” And with the back of his free hand, he slapped Solo hard in the face.

Dazed, Napoleon Solo came out of his stupor. He recognized his surroundings. His nose twisted as he inhaled the stench of burning clothing and insulation and human flesh. A cloud flitted past the sun, making a shadow skate on the roof.

Slowly Solo turned. Here and there across the roof, large aluminum ventilators revolved. Listening, he could catch the muted roar of the cooling plant blowing its exhaust of the hotel’s powerful heating and air at the sky.

Over his shoulder he saw the doorway to the stairwell still standing open. “They must still be up there,” he whispered.

Illya Kuryakin jerked his head at the little house-like structure. “You take that side. I’ll come around from the left.”

Carefully, silently, they stalked toward the stairhouse. Solo felt bitterly ashamed and shaken by his loss of control. But it wasn’t often in an agent’s career that he was personally responsible for the death of a fellow member of U.N.C.L.E.

If anything, the horrible sight of Sir Blightstone hanging from the upright T, clothing charred and smoldering, sparks shooting around his head like a ghastly halo in the morning sunlight, strengthened Solo’s resolve to catch the men who had killed him. The old, cold professional instinct was sharp in his mind as he crept up on the little stairhouse. Illya disappeared around the other side.

Sliding along the wall, Solo thought he detected a shadow moving ahead. He watched and was sure. A man moved out from cover of one of the ventilators.

Because the corner of the stairhouse cut off Solo’s line of vision, he could not see the man. But he saw the man’s shadow jump ahead, slipping toward the edge of the roof.

Not waiting for Illya, Solo took a wide step to his left. He brought his pistol up. His muscles tensed reflexively. He expected the three remaining Thrushmen to stand their ground, fire back. Solo’s trigger finger whitened.

Illya burst from cover on the other side of the small structure. He let out a cry of astonishment as Solo’s pistol exploded.

His aim was good. He caught one of the three running Thrushmen in the left thigh and dropped him. The other two who had been charging toward the low stone balustrade checked, crouched and reached for their fallen comrade. He fired again, missed. Then, Napoleon Solo ran forward, his face a mask of wrath.

Like trained gymnasts, the two THRUSH agents picked up the third and threw him over the balustrade. Then the Thrushmen clambered up on the balustrade themselves. One half-turned. Solo had a nightmare glimpse of the man's face–sweat-slicked, hair blowing, a crazed, almost beatific expression on the face. The man's eyes seemed to stand out like huge dark lanterns. The pupils of those eyes were enlarged gigantically.

"It's one of their drugged assault teams!" Illya cried, just as the first Thrushman stepped into space, smiling as he fell.

The second followed. A thin scream drifted up.

Napoleon Solo had seen THRUSH suicide agents before. But he's never gotten accustomed to them. The sight shook him even now. He stumbled to the balustrade and looked down.

The height was stupefying. The wind whipped at his face. Far below, traffic was disrupted on the street and sidewalks in front of the hotel. On the cement near the main entrance was a huge, reddish smear, like spilled paint.

Shaking his head, Napoleon Solo turned away. A moment later he looked across the roof to the electric sign.

A once-human thing hung on the T, blackened now except for a few patches of clothing yet unburned. Supported by the metal wrist cuffs and the leg chain, Sir Blightstone Jurrgens turned slowly as the breeze buffeted him. His face was a parboiled wound. His eyesockets were gelatinous black pits.

And Napoleon Solo said an angry word, one he seldom used. He then flung his pistol across the roof in a rage.

Illya put his hand on his friend's right shoulder. Solo stiffened. His face was ugly with self-loathing. He shook Illya's hand off and walked away. Down in the street sirens began to caterwaul.

FOUR

Alexander Waverly said, in a rather sharp tone, “Mr. Solo, we cannot continue this maudlin exercise in self-pity.”

Solo didn’t know what to say. He was empty. He’d lost something… Self-respect?… Confidence?

His clothes were rumpled. His hair hung askew. His eyes were red with fatigue. Horror seemed to crawl across his face like something living.

“I was assigned to *protect* him.” Napoleon Solo crashed his fist on the circular conference table. “How do you expect me to feel? Like dancing in the streets?”

It was very late at night. All day had been spent trying to obtain some lead to the THRUSH attack team, some clue as to where they’d come from and how they’d gotten inside the hotel. As usual, THRUSH had covered its tracks excellently, this time by assigning some of its operatives from the special cadre of fanatic volunteers who received post-hypnotic suggestions instead of verbal orders.

The U.N.C.L.E. agents had encountered such drug attack teams before. After hypnosis the suicide squad members were injected with a chemical which overrode their wills at critical points. If they ran into danger, for example, the kind from which a normal agent would turn aside, these THRUSH teams did not. By the same token, if they were pursued after a top-priority assignment was completed, they killed themselves. By stalking the killers across the roof of the *Hotel Transamerica*, Solo and Illya had triggered the suicide impulse.

The conference room was eerily quiet. Computers whirred softly. The flow of colored light patterns across their faces had diminished. Mr. Waverly confronted Solo sternly. “Yes, Mr. Solo, you were indeed assigned to protect Sir Blightstone. And in that assignment you failed. But–”

Illya interrupted: I’m as much to blame, sir. Like Napoleon, I noticed the eyes of those men when we passed them in the hotel hallway. The enlarged pupils. It should have occurred to me that–”

“Will you both *stop?”*

Waverly spoke with a loudness unusual for him. His gaze was intense, riveting itself on Solo particularly.

“This is not the first time an operative of this organization has failed. We will miss Sir Blightstone. I regret his death with a degree of personal emotion neither of you could possibly feel. He was my friend. Nevertheless–”

Waverly squared his shoulders. “U.N.C.L.E. is an organization of human beings. Perhaps a robot never makes a mistake. A man can. I do thank God, gentlemen, that those of us on this side are men, susceptible to error, and nor drug-ridden morons without emotion. What’s done is done. We can’t bring Jurrgens back. But I repeat what I said to you several times– *you* did not kill him. THRUSH killed him. You must not blame yourself. What matters now is–”

A message board on one of the computers flashed with a yellow warning sequence. Mr. Waverly strode toward the board. He picked up a combination mike-headphone set and replied in a low voice.

Abruptly Waverly stiffened. He continued to talk for a moment longer. Napoleon Solo silently drummed his fingers against the conference table.

Waverly was right. He shouldn’t let Blightstone’s death hit him that hard. U.N.C.L.E. had recovered from similar disasters before. If you made a mistake, you learned from it and didn’t make it again.

Why, then, *had* he taken this so personally? It puzzled him. Because of his intense weariness, he couldn’t think through to the reason why.

Mr. Waverly turned back from the message board. He was white. His hand shook for the barest part of a moment.

Illya stepped forward. “What is it, sir?”

“I was listening to a message picked up in Communications and recorded a moment ago. It came in one of our infrequently used shortwave bands .I–I’ll have the tape played.”

Illya and Solo exchanged alarmed looks. Alexander Waverly was positively ashen. He snapped over a toggle, spoke into the headset mike, “Mr. Jacques, will you please play the tape for Solo and Kuryakin?”

There was a tiny scratching in the concealed loudspeakers. Then came a thin, rather raspy voice, an irritating, almost effeminate voice which nevertheless held a raw note of hate.

“Good evening, Alexander. I trust you know who is speaking. I am recording this so it can be transmitted later tonight from a THRUSH Base. Actually I will be many thousands of miles away from the base when you hear me greet you, so it’s no use putting your tracers to work. I told you that

I was dedicated to one thing–death for the three of you who imprisoned me."

There was a pause on the tape. Solo could hear the sound of lips being licked, of spittle hissing through teeth as breath was sucked in.

"This morning Blightstone Jurrgens was the first. Neatly done, wasn't it? One by one. That was my promise. And one by one it's going to be. It's nicely started, Alexander. Perhaps you'll be next. For the moment, I wish you a pleasant evening."

And the obscenely moist voice died in a titter. Silence.

Illya Kuryakin spoke one word. "Edmonds."

"Yes." Waverly was still white. "Dantez Edmonds. Heaven help us, it *has* begun."

Then Solo knew what had caused his emotional reaction to the death of Sir Blightstone.

The life of his own chief, Waverly, would be a target soon.

And Napoleon Solo was desperately afraid that this time, again, he might fail.

ACT II

A PLAGUE ON U.N.C.L.E.‘s HOUSE

Fire stained the darkness far below. “There’s another village burning,” said Illya Kuryakin.

Wearing impeccable tropical whites, Illya sat next to the window of the chartered prop-jet which had whisked them out of Calcutta at sunset, heading north. Solo sat across the aisle, peering out past the port engine. They were the only passengers.

Solo brooded on the orange smears dropping behind into the jungle’s black. It was seventeen days since the death of Sir Blightstone Jurrgens and in that interval, their job had been routine, uneventful.

They had guarded Mr. Waverly night and day, in shifts. Nothing had happened. But in that time Solo had lost fourteen pounds, his appetite and his cheerful disposition.

As he watched the last orange gleams disappear behind the speeding aircraft he said: “According to the cable from old Bal’s niece–what’s her name again?”

“Indra,” answered Illya. “Indra Bal. Very attractive, I’m told.”

“She said the plague was spreading. Whole villages being infected, and having to be burned like that one. I was on Channel D at the Calcutta airport, and I heard there’s already a threat of rioting in Purjipur’s main cities. Plus that trouble with her neighbor–”

Solo was referring to a tense international situation which had developed between the Asian state of Purjipur and a neighboring republic. A border dispute, simmering for years, had now flamed into highly vocal threats and counter-threats. The possibility of armed conflict was not out of the question. From this troubled spot–it was Purjipur shooting by under the wings of the plane, black, heavily forested–had come the news only forty-eight hours ago of an outbreak of the type of plague which had killed Plympton.

The first reports told of bands of monkeys of a type entirely foreign to this part of the world appearing in the huts of sleeping villagers at night. The monkeys bit and clawed. In the hours following, scores of people had

begun to die, their faces purple-moist, distorted. Others did not die, but sunk into a coma. Apparently physical stamina determined whether the plague-like disease was instantly fatal.

Then, less than twelve hours earlier, Indra Bal had cabled that her uncle, Mohandus, had fallen ill at his summer residence and headquarters. Bal had succumbed to a tropical fever not of the same origin as the plague-disease but dangerous none the less. Local doctors seemed to feel that Bal's illness was natural. He was getting on in years, and drove himself too hard. His illness had come at a bad time for the whole India Purjipur area, and of course Mr. Waverly sensed the possibility of the hand of Dantez Edmonds at work somewhere. Solo and Illya were dispatched at once.

Now, as the prop-jet dropped through the night toward the landing strip at Bal's summer residence, Napoleon Solo felt again the mounting sense of fear.

Was Bal to be Edmonds' second victim?

TWO

The tall, amber skinned man in a long silk coat and turban drove the jeep expertly. He shot it down the concrete runway away from the prop-jet toward a collection of lights just ahead and to the left.

Solo had piled into the jeep's front seat. Illya was in the rear with their few pieces of luggage. Moist, warm jungle air streamed over their faces. It was a heavy, unpleasant sort of air that rose steamily from the tropical forest.

"That is the main house," said the amber-skinned man, who had introduced himself as Mr. Chandra, steward of the estate. "Mr. Bal is there now. Miss Indra also."

The jeep shot ahead. Solo had a dim impression of a large, old gingerbread mansion, a leftover from Colonial times. With its several wings and floors, its turrets and gables and widow's walk reminiscent of dead days when British lancers might have used the earth beneath the airstrip for a polo ground, it seemed grotesque and out-of-place.

"Why aren't we going directly to the house?" Solo wanted to know.

Mr. Chandra replied, "The physicians are with Mr. Bal now, and will be for another half hour or so. They are making their nightly check. Accordingly, Miss Indra felt it would be more convenient if you got settled in the guest house. Then you can meet her at the big house at nine."

"If you say so." Solo grumbled it, rather annoyed by this peculiar runaround.

The main house and its lights dropped behind, difficult to see in detail in the steamy night darkness. Only a few lights lined the runway, and just one dim marker shone at the far end to indicate the approach. Their pilot had seemed unconcerned, but Solo hadn't realized until they were on the ground what an unsafe landing it had been.

MR. Chandra's face settled into a fixed smile. His teeth shone whitely through his heavy beard. He cut the jeep toward the edge of the runway and bumped off along a rutted surface road. Heavy tropical trees closed in above them.

Shortly the jeep pulled up in front of a thatch cottage set in a small clearing practically on the edge of the jungle. Across the cottage's

verandah, an old-fashioned hurricane lamp burned on a table in the front window.

Mr. Chandra climbed out, apologizing: “Unfortunately the cottage is not electrified. But in every other respect, Miss Chandra trusts it will be satisfactory.”

“We’re less worried about the accommodations,” said Illya, “and more concerned about Mr. Bal’s condition. How is he this evening?”

Mr. Chandra pointed off toward one edge of the clearing. “By following that path–there, where the paving stones shine–you will arrive comfortably and safely at the main house. Good evening, gentlemen.”

The bearded man executed a formal bow, left the porch and was soon back in the jeep, roaring back up the rutted road to the airstrip.

“Goes by the book, doesn’t he?” Solo said as he stepped into the dim parlor with its single lamp, its mosquito netting over the windows, its fusty old Victorian furniture. “Mr. Bal could be in his last extremities, and probably Mr. Chandra would still bow and scrape and insist that everyone refresh themselves before doing anything about it.”

During his irritated little speech he’d been looking around the cottage parlor, the lamp lifted in his right hand. Illya had proceeded through one of the doors opening off the parlor, the entrance to one of two bedrooms. Solo walked over to that doorway now, watched as Illya flung open the bedroom closet and dumped his small flight bag inside. The lamp cast weird, dancing shadows on the old wallpaper.

Suddenly Solo froze.

Turning from the closet, Illya lifted an eyebrow. “What’s wrong Napoleon?”

“Stand still.”

Illya didn’t get the point.

“Did you run out of epithets for Mr. Chandra, or–?”

Solo’s voice was a raw whisper. “*Don’t move.* Not three feet behind you–”

“What is it?”

Illya’s temple showed a muscle cording suddenly. Solo stared past his shoulder, watching for confirmation that he’d been right the first time.

Yes, his eyes hadn’t played tricks. Up from behind the pillow on the side of the bed nearest Illya something moist-scaly was rising; rising in an

ugly, beautiful vertical glide. There was a space-like head at the top of the rising body, and a long, ferocious tongue darting between the fangs.

Solo stared at the thing rising from the bed clothing. He whispered:

"Cobra."

Illya Kuryakin turned pale. But he didn't turn around. He remained statue-stiff. "What shall I do?"

"Hold that position." Solo hardly dared to breathe the words. He took a slow, careful step to the rear. The cobra continued to rise, up to its full height now, swaying faintly. Its eyes shone.

Carefully, so carefully his arm ached from the effort to go slow, Solo inched the lamp downward.

Downward.

It seemed to take forever.

Finally the lamp's bottom bumped against the top of the little deal table Solo had spied when he walked in. The cobra's head darted a fraction of an inch. Its tongue and fangs were less than two feet behind the white back of Illya's jacket.

The cobra seemed to be moving itself forward, away from the pillows and across the coverlet, inching nearer to Illya every moment even though it remained vertical on the long column of its scaled body.

Solo's fingers ached with strain as he reached into the special pocket of his suit and caught the butt of his long-muzzled pistol.

Illya continued to watch him. The muscle beat violently in his forehead. Night insects made a racket out in the jungle. Slowly, slowly, Solo closed his fingers around the gun butt and began to pull the weapon out of the long pocket.

The forward sight snagged on the pocket lining. Solo had to twist to free it. The cobra's fangs ran wet with venom. It seemed to shift forward another few inches. The tongue darted, darted toward Kuryakin's back.

"I'm going to count," Solo breathed. "On three, hit the floor. Not until."

"Go ahead." Illya Kuryakin managed superb muscular control, not moving.

Solo watched the cobra as it slid forward another few inches. Its fangs dripped.

"One."

Illya's forehead wrenched as the muscle beat and beat.

"Two."

Illya curled his fingers into his palms and dug his nails into the flesh as he fought for control.

"Three!" Solo breathed, at the precise instant the cobra's spade head shot forward.

Illya dropped, making the floorboards rattle. The cobra struck empty air and launched itself off the bed. Solo knew he wouldn't have a second chance. He triggered slowly. The pistol thundered.

The cobra's head dissolved in a sudden spray of scales and greasy gray matter. The reverberations of the gunshot went echoing away. Breathing hard, Illya picked himself up. He brushed off his hands, turned and stared in horror at all that remained of the snake: a headless, still-wriggling body.

Solo shoved the pistol into his belt. He stripped a sheet off the bed, gingerly bent and picked up the cobra's remains, wrapping them round and round with the sheeting material. Then he carried the sheet outside and flung the bundle into the forest. He came back into the parlor, loosening his tie.

"Well, Illya, Mr. Chandra did say we should make ourselves comfortable. I wasn't a bit comfortable with that snake's corpse staring us in the face."

"Thank you for that shot," Illya said, with a composure which belied the inward agitation he must be feeling. He glanced at the mussed bed. "Accident?"

"Very likely not." Solo's eyes were grim. He headed out, picked up his bag. "Got to give Bal's daughter credit. You can't say she doesn't arrange a lively welcome."

"Bal's daughter couldn't be responsible for–"

"Of course not. Probably it was a little bird. A thrush. You find them in almost any climate, you know."

"So it seems," Illya replied through the thin partition. "Well, let's not keep Miss Bal waiting. Not when we have so much to tell her about the reception we received."

"I'd prefer not to tell her right away," Solo called back from the next bedroom as he peeled off his jacket. "If someone here is working for THRUSH, they may begin to wonder what happened to the cobra. And they may let their guard slip to find out."

"I must say, Napoleon, I never knew you to be so anxious to protect the reputation of a snake."

“Anything, Illya, to find the human one. And I’ll bet a dollar there is one, too.”

THREE

Within half an hour the two agents had changed clothes and were on their way to the main house. Napoleon Solo wore slacks, a bleeding madras shirt and sandals. He felt much more comfortable in the steaming heat.

Just before they reached the house, they saw a large black Cadillac pull away down the road which led off the property. In the distance two similar pairs of taillights receded like tiny red eyes, then vanished. The doctors had gone.

Several servants were gathered in a silent, sullen group on the verandah. As Solo and Illya approached, Mr. Chandra appeared in the main doorway. He spied the loafers, clapped his hands and yelled at them in a singsong tongue. The servants scuttled off into the darkness.

Chandra let them into the foyer, marble-floored and relatively cool. It was painted a cream color, with dark, high cabinets of mahogany ranged about the walls. A pair of Degas prints lent a touch of the West to the setting.

“The servants gather every night for a report on Mr. Bal’s condition,” explained Chandra. “The lazy louts use the evening report as a pretext for neglecting their duties.”

Mr. Chandra’s dark, shining eyes were unpleasant. Solo noticed that the man had extremely powerful hands, which he flexed a little as he walked toward closed double doors at one side of the foyer. “Miss Indra is here, gentlemen, in the library. Was everything in the cottage satisfactory?”

“Most entertaining,” said Illya with a bland smile. Chandra gave him a sharp, puzzled look. Illya ignored him, levering open the double doors.

The girl who strode forward from the white-painted mantel to greet them brought a whistle of breath to Solo’s lips. She was tall, splendidly turned out in a smart sleeveless Western frock of beige linen. The fabric’s light color contrasted dramatically with her clear amber skin. Her figure was exceptional, her face beautiful by any standard.

Indra Bal had dark eyes and hair which was neatly caught into a bun at the back of her head by a smile, elegant ivory clip. She wore white pumps with low heels, and a simple, ivory bracelet on her left arm.

“Mr. Solo–Mr. Kuryakin.”

She extended her right hand.

“I’m Napoleon Solo.” Suavely, he caught her fingers, felt their warmth. Her own smile was forced, though, and her beauty was spoiled by the shadows of fatigue beneath her eyes.

Illya said: “We’re very pleased to be here, Miss Bal. We hope we can be of service.”

Indra gave an absent little nod. “I hope you didn’t mind my not welcoming you personally. Uncle Mohandus has always prided himself on his excellent health. It is virtually a fetish with him, and on rare occasions when he has fallen ill, he has always insisted that no one except the immediate family be admitted to his room. Would you gentlemen care for something to drink? Tea? Sherry?”

Solo spoke up promptly: “Sherry wouldn’t be bad.”

“This way.”

Indra led the way to a cabinet. Solo helped Indra with three glasses and the decanter. He had the uneasy feeling that she was holding her emotions tightly checked, and might be hovering in the edge of hysteria.

After the sherry was poured Solo asked. “How is your uncle, Miss Bal?”

“You will please call me Indra. I will use your first names also.”

“Fine.” Illya said. “Has he shown any sign of improvement?”

“No.” The girl spilled a little of the sherry on the front of her dress, brushed at it with a nervous motion. “Tonight, in fact, he is much worse. The physicians are unable to diagnose his illness. We have many such unfamiliar maladies in this part of the world. But his fever is growing so high that I really don’t know what to do. I’m really almost–”

Quickly she covered her face, stifled the beginnings of a sob.

“How many doctors are attending your uncle?” Illya asked.

“Four,” Indra answered. “The best in Purjipur. But the medical resources of our state are not yet up to those of the Western world.

She set her sherry aside, scanning their faces. There was courage in that glance, but Solo identified it as courage, that was crumbling away bit by bit.

“Indra,” he said. “if you think the situation is really that serious, we should–”

“My uncle will die unless he receives better diagnosis and treatment,” she said bleakly. “Tonight the local physicians admitted that they were at their wit’s end.”

“Then I suggest we utilize the resources of the organization your uncle has served so well for so long,” Solo said. “I suggest we call our uncle in America.”

He walked to the ornamental fireplace, turned. “How much does Mr. Bal tell you about our organization, Miss Indra?”

“He does not violate security, if that is what you mean. Since I am his only relative, however, I have proper clearance to know something about his activities.”

Illya coughed discreetly. “What Napoleon is getting at, Miss Indra, is this. Your uncle Mohandus, together with two other men in the organization–one of whom has already been murdered—are on the death list of a secret agent who works for the other side.”

Indra shuddered. “Dantez Edmonds. That filthy man from THRUSH. Uncle Mohandus has told me.”

“There’s no reason to believe the plagues in the Purjipur villages may be the work of Edmonds,” Solo said. Indra lifted her head sharply as he went on, “And your uncle’s illness may have been caused directly or indirectly by Edmonds as well.”

“That is highly unlikely,” she said. “Uncle Mohandus hasn’t stirred from the house since he returned from the United States. His headquarters rooms on the third floor are steel-walled. And security here is rather tight.”

Illya’s eyebrow went up again. “Security? What security?”

“Every man on this estate who looks to be a servant–and there are some fifty of them–is actually one of my uncle’s agents.”

Solo whistled. “U.N.C.L.E. operatives? Even I didn’t know that.”

“In Asia,” Indra answered unevenly, “it is sometimes wise to work in rather devious ways.”

“How about your steward?” Illya Kuryakin wanted to know.

“Mr. Chandra? No, he is the only exception. But he’s been with Uncle Mohandus for years. He doesn’t know what Uncle Mohandus does in his third-floor quarters. He doesn’t know of the communications and computer equipment there. Mr. Chandra is never admitted to that part of the house. Indeed I’m sure he believes it’s merely a disused wing, because the entrance to the operations center is quite cleverly concealed. Architects and builders from you country remodeled the entire property to organization specifications when Uncle Mohandus retired from field work and took this executive post.”

Napoleon Solo was tempted to make a comment about Indra Bal's misplaced faith in the security of the jungle estate. A memory of the spade-headed cobra deviled him a moment. He thrust it aside, saying: "Then you don't see any way in which Edmonds or THRUSH could have caused your uncle's illness?"

"None at all."

"There have been no attacks of monkeys?" Illya's mouth wrinkled. "I know that sounds a bit ludicrous, but–"

"I have been in the villages and seen the purple skins," she whispered. "There is no need to apologize. But we've had no trouble like that here."

"The monkeys are the reason we think Edmonds is in Purjipur," Solo explained. "But let's take care of first problems first."

From his pocket he drew his rod-like communicator. He twisted the barrel until the calibrations lined up. The communicator emitted a low *wheep-wheep.* Solo spoke into one end.

"Open Channel D, please. Priority clearance."

In a moment Mr. Waverly's voice responded: "Mr. Solo! Glad to know you arrived safely."

"Mr. Bal is in extreme straits, sir. The local physicians can't seem to do a thing for him."

"He'll die without the proper help." Indra said. "Of that I am certain."

"Any evidence of the participation of–ah–the gentleman from the past, Mr. Solo?"

"Not so far, sir," Solo answered. Illya stared at the ceiling, ignoring the lie and probably thinking of the cobra. "I'm requesting assistance sir. Specifically, an U.N.C.L.E. hospital plane as quickly as possible. I want to fly Mr. Bal back to the states. We think his illness is coincidental with the troubles here. But whatever the cause, he's in very serious condition, and needs the best attention he can get."

"One moment, Mr. Solo, please."

A tense silence held in the room until Waverly's voice crackled out again: "We can have a hospital plane in there by this time tomorrow night. I hope it will be soon enough. The pilot will have all necessary instructions. Nonstop back to New York. I will arrange clinic facilities."

"Good sir. Thank you. Shall Kuryakin and I stay here?"

"That would be advisable," Waverly replied. "The matter of the plague monkeys still merits close attention."

“We’ll look into it,” Solo said. “Thank you, sir. Out now.”

“And thank you both,” Indra Bal said with a low, husky voice when Solo had put the communicator away. There were tears in the corners of her eyes as she smoothed her skirt. “I’ve been very rude. Probably you’ve had no evening meal–”

“Yes, we are a bit hungry,” Solo had decided it would be well to keep her mind on subjects other than her uncle.

Indra rang a bell-pull. Mr. Chandra appeared at the doorway, inscrutable as ever. Indra ordered dinner. They had another glass of sherry while they waited.

The house was stifling. Outside; through the open windows, insects rattled and chirped. Napoleon Solo struggled to make conversation and had trouble. Indra was nervous. She spoke mostly in monosyllables. Solo decided it was going to be a long twenty-four hours until the hospital plane arrived tomorrow night.

Shortly they went into the large dining room for dinner. The rest of the evening passed without incident. Solo and Illya retired to the cottage a little after midnight, somewhat uncertain as to what their next move should be.

Nature took care of that, in the form of a blistering, roaring tropical rainstorm which lashed out of the sky at dawn. The storm continued on throughout the day into the evening hours, and made the possibility that the hospital plane could land extremely unlikely.

Shortly after nine Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin and Indra Bal were gathered around one of the powerful radios in Mr. Bal’s private quarters high in the house. The room was a smaller version of Mr. Waverly’s headquarters in New York. Solo’s forehead glistened with sweat. He had a microphone close to his lips. Outside, loud even through the sound-deadened steel walls, the storm roared.

A voice crackled from the big metal face of the radio set: “This is Signal Two. I made my pass right where my instruments tell me the end of the runway should ne, over.”

Solo cracked back: “Can’t you see the lights, over?”

“I can’t be sure. This rain’s nearly tearing the plane apart, over.”

“You’ve got to come down if it’s at all possible,” Solo answered. “Hang on, over.”

“Will do. But it’s rough up here. Over and out.” The pilot sounded uneasy, with excellent reason.

“Indra,” Solo asked, “are there any other lights on the estate? We could run the jeep out on the runway with its headlights on, but we need more than that.”

“There are flares in our storehouse,” she replied. “Several cases of them.”

Solo was already back on the radio: “Signal Two? I’m going out to set flares on the runway. As many as I can. Then if you can see them, Mr. Kuryakin will try talking you down.”

Without waiting for a reply, Solo dropped the mike and followed Indra from the room.

Moments later he was dashing from the storehouse in the rain, his arms laden with the flares. The rain slashed viciously hard into his face. And out of the storm’s murk. Quite suddenly, came the attackers.

FOUR

A flower of scarlet gloomed in the rain, shooting off sparks. The flare cast an eerie, distorted light, its wavering radiance cross-slashed by the water that poured out of the sky.

Napoleon Solo thrust the flare into the glutinous mud at the runway's edge. He shielded his eyes with one hand to watch a moment, wanting to make certain the flare would burn. It sputtered a bit, but even the torrential downpour couldn't nullify the incendiary chemical inside the slender cylinder.

As the flare continued to glow Solo murmured a monosyllable of satisfaction, scooped up the rest of the flares and ran on down the edge of the concrete.

About a dozen yards from where the last one had been planted, he fired the second with its own fuse mechanism built right into the separate cap. The fire blazed. Solo bent to place it in the mud. He planned to work his way down one side of the runway and then back up the other. Since the flares had a theoretical burn-time of about half an hour, he planned on setting them in less than fifteen minutes. Then the pilot of the hospital plane somewhere up there in the crashing black skies would have fifteen minutes more to try to bring his aircraft in.

Standing up from placing the second flare, Solo saw dim figures sprinting toward him through the rain. By the flare's light, he saw gun barrels gleam.

"Who is it?" he bawled, clawing for his own pistol just in case.

A machine pistol stuttered. Bullets ate across the concrete toward him, pockmarks appearing suddenly in the tarmac like round, ugly wounds. Instinctively Solo hauled his own clear of his jacket and dived over backwards into the mud as guns opened up.

The attackers–he counted at least eight men in the dark, nondescript trousers and jackets–were still a good distance away. The pouring rain made vision difficult. And Solo had the additional disadvantage of being limed by the flares.

With his chin in the mud, he started crawling to the right, toward the darkness. More shots came spitting at him. One plucked the cuff of his

trousers. He jerked his leg up, finally reached a relatively dark patch midway between the two sputtering flares. There he squiggled around frantically in the jelly-like mud so he faced the runway now. He propped himself up on his right elbow and peered into the murk to shoot.

Silence out there. The figures of the attackers had melted away.

Rainwater spilled into his eyes. There was only the hiss of the storm now, and the distant muttering of the circling hospital plane. His right hand shook. He wanted to shoot. But there was no one left to shoot.

Where had they gone? Slipped off to flank him–?

Even as this thought registered, Solo realized he'd lost valuable seconds, and that they had probably come around him in the darkness. He twisted onto his left side, straining to see past the fireburst of the second flare. At that instant a man yelled behind him, a hoarse cry of triumph. Solo spun back onto his right side, firing blindly.

Four of the men who'd crept round to his flank came charging at him from the direction of the first flare. Another pounded in from his left, scooping up one of the flares Solo had dropped.

Solo shot at the larger group of attackers. His bullet dropped one man screaming with a slug in his stomach. The man racing up from the left lighted the flare he was carrying and threw it like a dynamite stick.

The flare plopped down not a foot from Solo's head, fountaining up its scarlet sparks, illuminating Solo like a bright target. Firing, stumbling in the gluey mud, he struggled to his feet.

The attackers were almost on him now. The two in the lead leveled their machine pistols. Solo didn't recognize their featureless, ragtag clothing; the dark tunics and pantaloons were not the uniforms worn by the men stationed on the estate. But he did recognize the hard-eyed, professional faces of trained THRUSH assassins and he acted accordingly, blazing away with his pistol.

The attacker nearest him went to his knees in the mud, machine pistol still rattling. Solo leaped, kicked the man aside. His movement put him out of the line of fire, for a moment. The second man racing up missed for that reason.

Solo jumped to the right, over the man's fallen body. As the second attacker swung around after him, Solo shot twice. The Thrushman clutched the side of his face. Blood gushed out between his pressed-together fingers. Howling, the man went down. Solo started to turn again–

A massive fist slammed the side of his head, spinning him off his feet. He flailed at the air. He landed on his back. Another of the Thrushmen darted in, drew his foot back and kicked Solo in the side of the head.

Desperately Solo tried to lift his pistol. The Thrushman stamped on his wrist. Solo's fingers went slack. His pistol slid away into the mud as he fought back the terrific pain the man's foot had inflicted.

The THRUSH agent towered over him. Dark Eurasian eyes glared with fanatic hate. The man aimed the automatic down at Solo's head.

Feebly Solo tried to rise. Dizziness swept him. The automatic's muzzle loomed–

A shadow-shape materialized behind the Thrushman. The new arrival caught the gunman's shoulder, spun him around.

"I told you it was not necessary to kill him! The others have already converged on the house. That is where our target lies." And with a curse, the new arrival struck the gunman in the face and sent him reeling off through the rain.

A heavy .45 in his fist, Mr. Chandra smiled down at Napoleon Solo. Chandra's beard sparkled with rain. His dark eyes were like bits of fire in his amber face. A cruel white smile cracked the beard.

I will be back for you, Mr. Solo," he promised. "The cobra I loosed from its basket failed me miserably, so now there is no time to dispose of you in a fitting way. Slowly. But there will be. Until we finish or priority work–" Mr. Chandra bent down, his right arm flying back. "–rest well in the slime you belong."

With a chopping blow of his gun hand, Mr. Chandra smashed Solo's temple with steel. Chandra turned and slipped like a ghost up through the rain toward the great house. Solo tried to cry out. Thunder ripped the sky, drowning out the engines of the circling plane. The flares sputtered and shot off sparks.

Solo lifted himself on hands and knees. He was covered with sticky brown mud from head to foot. His mind echoed and pinged with eerie sounds. He knew he was going to black out.

Mr. Chandra had sold out, then, was working for THRUSH. Had somehow managed to smuggle his own squad of killers in through the perimeter of the estate.

Where were the U.N.C.L.E. agents who lived on the property? Why weren't they here, responding to the shots?

All at once he caught a new sound. Voices. Shouting, confused. Far off on the opposite side of the runway. Those would be Mr. Bal's men, rallying now, trying to find out what was happening in the chaotic confusion of thunder and rain.

Solo cried a warning to them. Only a kind of gargling croak came out of his throat.

Men were running across the concrete, calling orders to one another. *Too late,* he thought. *You're coming too late.*

He had one last vision of Illya Kuryakin and Indra Bal up there in house, waiting for him by the radio while Mr. Chandra and his killers swept in on them–

Abruptly Solo blacked out. His face slid into the mud. The rain slashed at the back of his head which looked like nothing so much as a great gooey brown rock. The U.N.C.L.E. agents charging across the runway reached him, passed him and raced on without noticing him lying there unconscious, covered with brown slime.

FIVE

Static snarled and crackled. Illya Kuryakin was saying into the microphone: “What’s that, Signal Two? Please repeat. I didn’t catch it; there’s too much interference. Over–”

More faintly than before, the pilot responded, “Somebody tit two flares. I saw them when I made my last pass over the strip. But that’s not nearly enough light. My fuel’s running low. If I don’t get down soon I’ll have to turn around and start back for Calcutta. Over.”

“Napoleon Solo is out on the field. He should be putting down more flares. Over.”

“The last one started burning about five minutes ago. There haven’t been any since, over.” The pilot had to shout above the rattling of the static.

Illya glanced at Indra. “Perhaps I’d better go out and have a look.”

Fear washed the girl’s lovely face, paling it even more. At that moment, above the drone of the rain, Illya heard something bump against the wall in the corridor. The sound was barely audible because of the thickness of steel that made up the wall of this box-like chamber.

Without saying a word, Illya laid the microphone aside. It continued to emit a mixture of static and the garbled voice of the pilot wanting to know whether anybody was there. Illya put a finger up to his lips in the traditional warning gesture, snaked his pistol from the pocket of his white jacket. The steel door to the outer hall was shut and double-locked.

Was Napoleon coming back? Illya started toward the door, intending to inch it open cautiously. Indra started to say something. Illya turned to hear, and in so doing took a step away from the door.

That step saved him.

The corridor wall exploded inward with a clap of sound, a gush of flame and a puff of smoke.

The steel door teetered forward. Illya caught Indra around the waist and bowled her back against a small computer whose face flickered with lights. The steel door crashed to the floor with thunderous force. In the smoke that boiled in, figures lunged and leaped into the room.

Illya threw himself in front of Indra, whipped his gun up. The man in the lead of the attack party slammed a gun barrel down on his wrist. He

cursed, dropping his gun, diving for it, and a heavy hand rabbit-punched the back of his neck.

More men in nondescript tunics crowded through the door. Illya punched, flailed. But the force of numbers was against him.

Two of the men caught his arms. A third pounded his midsection with rights and lefts until Illya's breath was beaten out of him. He hung in the arms of his captors, his gut aching, his mind whirling.

Behind him in the smoke, Indra screamed and struggled. The attackers overpowered her too. What in God, name had happened to Solo?

Illya was dragged out through the wrecked door frame into the hallway. Hand torches flickered as men ran here and there in the dimness. Past the hallway railing, Illya could see a light gleaming in the cream-colored foyer far below. The main doors of the foyer flapped in the wind. Rain drove in, gathering in pools on the marble flooring.

To Illya's right along the hallway, someone was standing in the dark. This unseen person spoke in a tone of command: "Two of you. Fetch Bal."

Struggling to think coherently, Illya tried to remember where he had heard that voice. Indra screamed the name first, *"Chandra!"*

The tall man stepped forward to the hallway railing. Some of the light from the foyer leaked upward across his face. If anything, he looked more arrogant than usual, with a cold patina of cruelty added to the regular haughtiness of his features.

"You are quite correct, Miss Bal. It is I. I regret this inconvenience to you–"

"Working for THRUSH, are you?" Illya cried out.

Mr. Chandra's face became a fanatic's mask. "Since my fourteenth year, I am proud to say."

"You filthy–"

But Illya's vituperation was suddenly drowned out by moans and a clatter of footsteps off to the right. Two of the Thrushmen appeared in a lighted doorway which had just opened. Between them, and pitiful in an old-fashioned white-night dress, his eyes luminous with fever, hung Mohandus Bal.

Mr. Chandra licked his lips and bowed deferentially to Indra. "I am indeed sorry, Miss Bal, that we do not have the time to carry out this assignment in a suitable style. However, I am under orders to perform the

job as efficiently as possible. We will be unable to make it a lingering death, which I am certain you would enjoy more fully."

Chandra's bearded face cracked wide with that awful white smile. He gestured down toward the nearby foyer.

"I am afraid our shooting has aroused the U.N.C.L.E. agents masquerading as your uncle's servants. Ah yes, I know all about them. I know many things about this house you would not expect me to know. I have played the role of the faithful servant for many years, at the request of my superiors. The lickspittle operatives who are rushing here this moment will be a bit too late."

Mr. Chandra turned. With an exquisitely casual flip of his right hand, he said, "Throw him over."

Indra lunged forward, half escaping from her captors as she shrieked: "*No!* My God, don't do that to him–"

Her scream wailed up as Mr. Bal's captors lifted him, hurled him out over the hallway railing and smiled at each other as he dropped straight to the marble of the foyer.

With a huge, pulpy thud he struck. Indra screamed hysterically.

Illya was half conscious. Down into the foyer he glimpsed the sudden hideous splash of red that smeared both floor and walls.

The doors from the verandah crashed open. Guns drawn, the first of the estate servants skidded inside. They recoiled at the mingled water and blood swirling across the floor.

Mr. Chandra did not seem perturbed. He reached into one pocket of his long silk coat. He drew out three small football shaped capsules, dropped them one after another over the foyer rail.

One of the U.N.C.L.E. agents spotted the first of the capsules spiraling downward. He aimed up at Chandra as the other men thrust forward into the foyer with rain swirling around them.

The capsules struck the marble and popped. Instantly, coils of greenish smoke spread from wall to wall. The agent with the gun never had a chance to fire. Seizing his throat, he dropped, choking. His tongue protruded from his open mouth. His facial muscles jerked spasmodically.

Illya's belly turned over. He made an abortive drive forward, was clipped on the back of the neck and sagged again.

With grotesque moans, the men down in the foyer toppled over one by one.

Dead.

Mr. Chandra dusted his hands together in a gesture of dismissal. He turned. Indra Bal had slumped over unconscious. Chandra strode toward Illya, caught the point of his chin in two cruel fingers, lifted his head with a jerk. To his men he said: “This one and that Solo person we left out by the landing strip are important and highly placed U.N.C.L.E. operatives. Perhaps it would be well to take them along.”

“We can’t go back for the other one,” said one of Illya’s captors.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Chandra said. “It could be risky. Other operatives may be combing the ground by now. The trucks are waiting at the back of the house to take us as far up into the jungle as we can go by mechanical means.” Chandra stroked his beard, decided, straightened up. “Very well. I shall accept the responsibility. Our master may be amused. We’ll take this Kuryakin fellow and Miss Bal. Perhaps a young lady, the daughter of his enemy, will provide a certain little extra fillip to lighten the master’s hours. Especially now that he must devote so much of his time to the larger aspects of the operational plan.”

Chandra clapped his hands lightly. Down in the foyer the greenish smoke was blowing out across the verandah. The twisted bodies of the gassed agents lay like figures in some nightmare painting. The whole floor was awash with the blood from the ruined body of Mr. Mohandus Bal. Chandra pointed.

“We shall take the rear stairs to the truck. Then he gave Illya’s chin a last vicious twist. “Cheer up. You know where you’re going, don’t you?”

Illya saw Chandra sneering at him, spat.

Chandra seized Illya’s hair. “You vile, unspeakable–you’re going to *Edmonds*. We’ll see how you like that!”

But Illya Kuryakin had finally lost consciousness.

SIX

Tropical birds. Screaming, chattering–They made a ferocious din that bit against Illya's ear drums with actual physical pain. Kuryakin struggled to lift his head. It felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds, and his eyelids bore a major share of that weight.

He shifted, testing his body. Although he could see nothing, he could tell by the sharp cutting of a substance which felt like leather or rawhide that his wrists were bound. He thought he heard someone breathing close by.

Then, as though he were listening to a stereo system, he realized that the sources of the sound were actually two: a light, rushed, uneven breathing came from his right; from the left, he heard a whistling of breath that was sharper, more insistent and urgent.

Illya fought his eyes open. The chattering continued. Now Illya recognized the source. Not the birds at all.

Beyond the barred window of the little shack the black fronds of jungle shrubs nodded in a fetid breeze. The shrubbery was illuminated from the left by the glare of a small spotlight. It was night out there, and not much better in here. The hut was lit by a portable battery lantern set in one corner of the dirt floor. Two heavy wooden beams imbedded in the dirt rose to the center roof tree, which was the only substantial looking thing in the little hut except for the window bars. The chattering dinned, a maddening cacophony–

It came from the dozens and dozens of cages around the walls, cages ranged from ceiling to floor. Inside each cage was a small to medium-sized monkey. Some had full, curling tails. Others were of the stubby, tailless variety. Some shook the bamboo bars of their cages. Others crouched in the dark corners of the cages. All of them showed their teeth and chattered in fear, their curiously human faces peering at him like distortions from a nightmare.

Indra Bal was lashed to the post on Illya's right. Her dark skirt and white blouse were filthy with mud and dust. Her hair hung in her face. Her wrists were tied behind her back and around the post by means of a thick leather strap. Barely conscious, she mumbled to herself.

By tugging, Illya Kuryakin discovered that his bonds were equally secure.

“That will do no good at all, Mr. Kuryakin,” said a voice, the source of breathing on his left.

Turning, Illya stared at the man. Very tall, almost emaciated, he wore a spotless white suit and matching shoes which showed not the slightest trace of mud. The man rubbed his hands together, an old, papery sound.

He stepped around in front of Illya. He cocked his head and peered at his captive with a mixture of curiosity and loathing.

“My little station,” said the man, “is well hidden in the jungle. We are quite a few miles from Mr. Bal’s home. To be most accurate, the home of the *late* Mr. Bal. And, we are also a good distance from any of the principal cities of Purjipur. The provincial police never range this far. Finally, I have expert teams of men trained by THRUSH to guard these premises. One is on duty directly outside. Others are strategically located in case you should attempt to break out in another direction. Thoughtful of Mr. Chandra to bring you along, you and the girl. Yes, thoughtful. We shall have an amusing little time before we’re done.”

Illya Kuryakin licked his lips. “You must be Edmonds.”

The man had a peculiar courtliness about him. It was accented by the way he used his bony-fingered hands for theatrical gestures of emphasis. As he bowed in response to Illya’s words, his black string tie fell away from the high collar of his shirt. His hair was long, thick and brown. It almost curled into ringlets at the nape of his neck.

Edmonds’ aquiline face had the look of genteel starvation. His nose was sharp and long. Below his mouth dangled a wisp of a brown goatee to further heighten the air of rather Bohemian elegance. The man’s round brown eyes were full of amused hatred as he replied: “That is correct. Dantez Edmonds, at your service.”

Edmonds clicked his heels together. The count, thought Illya. He’s playing the role to the hilt and enjoying it. A man from yesterday; a perverted, fanatical modern Monte Cristo who affects the beard and the postures to maintain the image.

With a little inward shudder of repulsion Illya tried to remember his professional training, tried to keep himself from growing unnerved as memories of what had happened earlier tonight flooded back. His jaw pushed out at a defiant angle.

“Do you have Napoleon Solo a prisoner here too?” he asked.

Edmonds caressed his cheek with a bony index finger. “Your comrade? No, I believe Mr. Chandra left him at the airstrip. But be assured; your friend will never find you. Not here, not in this forest. The road in here is not easily found by outsiders. We are quite alone, you and I and the charming Miss Bal.”

Edmonds lifted the moaning girl’s limp hand, then let it drop. We’ll know what to do about her.” Suddenly, his mood shifted with manic swiftness. He lunged forward and seized Illya’s sleeve. His eyes shone hellish bright in the glow of the battery lantern, and flecks of spittle caught in his goatee as he spewed out words:

“Where were the scruples and the sensibilities of your filthy organization when I was on trial? Trial! Hah! A kangaroo court! One which thought nothing of *my* sensibilities when it locked me away on that misbegotten Isle for the rest of my life.”

“Your stay was relatively short,” Illya countered. His forehead hurt. He tired to gather his wits. He must stay alert to possibilities of escape. He tested the wrist thongs behind his back and found them very strong, said: “Like a bad penny–or a mad dog–you have come back.”

“Did they think I wouldn’t? Oh, did they think I wouldn’t?” Edmonds suddenly squared his shoulders. “You saw how important I am to THRUSH. You saw that! They assisted in my escape. And when I showed them what I had stolen from the Isle, THRUSH Central gave me unlimited funds. *Unlimited*–funds, do you hear?”

Edmonds spun and flung a hand out toward the cages. “Do you see those, my friend? Every one of those monkeys is now inoculated with the serum drawn from the body-fluid of the research monkey which I stole. THRUSH Central recognizes this for the breakthrough it is.” He leaned close again, his breath faintly foul and tinged with a smell of cloves. “This country, Purjipur, is only a pilot experiment.”

“How many of the diseased animals have you already let loose?” Illya asked.

“A mere dozen. And I think we both know the damage those twelve have done just in the past few days.”

“To my knowledge there has been no damage of any–”

Edmonds danced forward and slashed Illya Kuryakin viciously across the cheeks with his open hand.

“Liar! You know all about the infected villages that have been torched because of the disease.”

Illya’s voice was toneless. “I am not aware–”

“Oh yes, yes, *naturally!”*

Laughing and weeping at the same time, Edmonds drew an immense white silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his white jacket. He wiped his eyes, rocking back and forth Illya noticed that Edmonds wore men’s dress pumps in patent leather, with formal satin bows.

“Naturally,” Edmonds chortled, “naturally you must deny knowing anything of the destruction my little pets have already wrought. For your information, Kuryakin–“Edmonds completed wiping his eyes. He thrust the handkerchief away with a sniff. “–there will be more, much more. Before another week is out, all ninety-eight of my infected pets will be loose in Purjipur. Not only in the hills and forests, but in the cities. Imagine the panic! The riots, the fires! One monkey can infect hundreds in an hour!”

All of the grisly pictures Edmond conjured could easily be imagined by Illya Kuryakin. But he didn’t want to show how shaken he was.

As if sensing this, Edmonds tried for additional shock effect.

“And THRUSH shall benefit. Oh yes, definitely. My men are already at work to make certain that damaging evidence is found in one of Purjipur’s most important cities. Evidence to indicate that Purjipur’s neighboring state is responsible for the pestilential influx.” Edmonds slitted his eyes and giggled. “Do you see what that implies?”

Clearly Illya did. Purjipur and the state with whom it was having a border dispute were already on war’s brink. Other nations throughout Asia and even into the Middle East were aligning themselves, taking a position and hardening it.

Edmond whispered sibilantly: “There will be war, Mr. Kuryakin. War in Purjipur. Then war throughout Asia. War sweeping into Africa and the Suez. And always THRUSH will be there. Gaining strength. Consolidating. Taking over tottering governments with shadow cabinets and puppet presidents–

“Little monkeys in cages can’t do all that,” Illya said. But he was afraid they could. He’d seen the devastating way Plympton died, and the fires burning across Purjipur.

Edmond drew himself up to full height. “To men of limited vision, Mr. Kuryakin, men such as one finds in *your* group, of course it’s impossible.

We of THRUSH possess one thing you do not. Dedication. The dedication to turn the improbable into a reality. Pestilence is a deadly weapon. It spreads fear. And fear births more fear–" Edmonds giggled a last time. "There is also another matter. Yes, now that both Jurrgens and Mr. Bal are dead, there is another matter. The third man. The one I hate most of all."

"Alexander Waverly."

"Correct. The monkeys will kill him too, Mr. Kuryakin.' Edmonds' eyes burned coal-bright. "Mr. Waverly will feel their bite and die an exquisite death." Turning, he started for the door. "In the meantime we shall take excellent care of you. I want you alive to receive a first-hand report of his death. I intend to go to America to accomplish it."

Cursing, Illya lunged against his bonds. It was no use. Edmonds stepped outside. His voice rang silvery and macabre behind him; "A plague on your house, Mr. Kuryakin. A plague on the house of U.N.C.L.E. I myself will bring it. And sooner than my old friend Waverly expects."

The laughter died out there in the jungle.

The spotlight glared on the humidly stirring fronds of jungle foliage. The monkeys kept up their horrendous din. Illya Kuryakin pulled and pulled against his bonds.

Finally, panting and sick with defeat, he gave up.

Blood leaked down his wrists. It dripped from his fingertips behind the post and struck the dirt with a gentle plopping rhythm. In the distance a truck motor revved up.

Indra continued to moan softly, slumped back against the post where she was bound. Illya tried to quench the fear Edmonds had kindled inside him, fear that the man might, just might have formulated a plan which could incinerate this entire part of the globe in war, and leave the world situation ripe for a THRUSH coup.

The final victory? It might even come to that. The feral eyes of the monkeys stared back at him from their cages.

Illya's spine crawled as he thought of the toxic poisons in the bloodstreams of the little creatures. He knew that it was up to him to break free and stop Edmonds.

The long, steamy night wore away. Mr. Chandra looked in once to taunt them. Illya gradually became aware of the voices of many men moving outside the hut.

This must be a relatively large THRUSH station. Trucks came and went all night long. A ferocious looking Sikh stepped in at one point and removed three cages from one wall, careful to keep his hands away from the bars. Carrying the cages, the Sikh vanished. A few moments later another truck roared off.

From out in the jungle came the sounds of animals. Large animals, snarling and roaring. How far was this station from civilization? Could a man make it through that jungle?

Presently Indra Bal woke up. She looked at him feverishly. “Illya, Illya, this place–it’s their station?”

He nodded.

“We must get away from them. Dear, we must!” She was hysterical.

He said quickly, “Of course we will, Indra.”

He thought of Dantez Edmonds somewhere out there in the night plotting Mr. Waverly’s execution. He doubted his own words. But he repeated them anyway: “Of course we will. There is always a way.”

The words were on his tongue, bitter as gall. This time, he was afraid there might be no way out at all.

ACT III
TIGER, TIGER, BURNING BRIGHT

Five nights after Illya Kuryakin first confronted Dantez Edmonds in Purjipur, Napoleon Solo sat in a dim little bar in New York’s East Fifties, getting quickly drunk. A jukebox played a moaning rock and roll number. The bartender dozed. Ordinarily Solo never got past one social drink when he was on assignment. It was bad for stamina, for professional endurance.

But this was different. This was pain and frustration too deep to bear. Plus unholy waiting that gnawed the nerves and filled the mind with phantoms. For one thing, he was certain Kuryakin was dead.

“Another,” Solo muttered. The bartender refilled his glass without question.

Thinking back, Solo wondered what he’d done wrong. He’d awakened at the edge of the airstrip of Bal’s property. He stumbled up to the house and discovered the red carnage in the foyer: Mr. Bal smashed to death and the U.N.C.L.E. agents gassed. Solo blamed himself bitterly.

Like a man berserk he ran through the house, shouting for Indra and Illya. Both were gone. Truck tracks in the mud behind the house

disappeared down a feeder road that led into the jungle.

The rainstorm diminished by morning. Solo called for reinforcements and a ‘copter load of U.N.C.L.E. agents arrived by nine. The teams fanned out through the jungle, following the truck tracks. Shortly they came upon a light van, abandoned. Its left tires were mired in mud.

The searchers beat on up into the infernally hot jungle for the remainder of the day. But those they pursued were skillful. There was no noticeable trail, no clue to be found. The Thrushmen had simply melted into thousands of square miles of rain forest that spread across much of Purjipur.

Solo gave up, returning to the capitol city to organize a larger search team. The news in the city was bad. More monkey attacks were being reported. Villages were being burned by the dozens. The border dispute was heating, and tanks were rumbling toward the frontier.

On his first night in the hotel, Solo received a call from an anonymous voice informing him that Alexander Waverly would be the third and last man to be killed by Dantez Edmonds. Immediately he called Waverly on his communicator. The latter seemed less perturbed than Solo was. He ordered Solo to return by the first flight to New York.

Solo protested. Waverly overrode him. And so Napoleon Solo came back to New York, with nothing to do, and no orders from Waverly except a cryptic one–wait.

He tried to do paper work during the day. No good. He prowled the bars at night and tried to sleep a few hours along toward dawn. Weight was dropping off him at an astounding rate.

Solo’s hand clenched around the glass, his face ugly with frustration. He wanted to throw the glass at the back bar, hear bottles smash. What stopped him was the bartender tapping his arm.

“Your name Solo?”

“Yes.”

“Just had a phone call for you. Your uncle said to tell you that Aunt Xenia was down with the virus again.”

“The virus?” Solo’s eyes narrowed. *The virus!”* He leaped off the stool, flung bills on the bar, charged out toward the taxi rank.

It was the Priority Alert.

TWO

Ten minutes later he was tramping back and forth in Mr. Waverly's office.

"Don't be so agitated, Mr. Solo." Waverly seemed the soul of composure, tenting his fingers as he leaned back in his massive chair. His eyes were speculative. "I received a radio message from our friend Dantez Edmonds just moments before I got in touch with you." He coughed. "You–ah–had forgotten your pocket communicator, I'm afraid. Hence the telephone. Be careful of the alcohol, Mr. Solo. It's not like you."

"It's not often I face the possibility that my best friend is dead!" Solo shot back. "Sir."

"Yes, yes, quite understandable. But Mr. Kuryakin is alive."

"Alive!"

"Or so Edmonds led me to believe. I tend to put faith in that much of his message." Waverly's gaze remained cool, unruffled. "Of the three of us, he has saved me to the last. I think he will want to meet me in person and try to kill me himself. I have been hoping he would use some such approach, which is precisely why I returned you to duty here. It seems Mr. Dantez Edmonds is willing to bring Illya Kuryakin to New York and turn him over to us in return for a sum of one hundred thousand dollars."

Sickened, Napoleon Solo plopped into a chair. "So that's it. If Edmonds hasn't killed Illya, policy will. U.N.C.L.E. never ransoms its agents."

"Policy," said Waverly, "is only useful so long as it does not hamper efficiency. In this case, Edmond is our target just as I am his. I agreed to the bargain in principle." While Solo sat stunned, Waverly continued, "I am to receive another message tomorrow at noon covering details. Naturally it's a trick, a stratagem to lure me to whatever Edmonds wants me. But I intend to be there. And you'll be with me, Mr. Solo." Waverly rose, clapped Solo on the shoulder. "Agreeable?"

For the first time in days, Solo grinned. "Of course. But is Illya really–"

"Alive? I am hopeful of it. I assume it would serve Edmonds purpose better to bait me with a live Kuryakin than a dead one."

Unexpectedly, Napoleon Solo chuckled. "If I may say so, sir, you're a fox."

Thank you, Mr. Solo.” Mr. Waverly harrumphed modestly. “One does like to keep in practice and not turn everything over to you younger fellows.”

Waverly indicated one of the lighted card boards. “I am already assembling a half dozen of our best men. You will take charge. And when Mr. Dantez Edmonds gets in touch with us again, I shall agree to whatever he requests. I shall be prepared to meet him anywhere with the ransom fund. And together, we shall be prepared to turn back the jaws of his trap and close him in one of our own.”

THREE

In the little hut where the cages monkeys chattered, the days and nights had become nightmare.

Illya Kuryakin and Indra Bal were treated little better than the plague-carrying inmates of those tiny barred boxes ranged round the walls. Their guards, a mixture of European and Asian THRUSH personnel, took every opportunity to torment or make sport of them. Indra particularly was subjected to some vile and humiliating physical abuse.

But surprisingly, since her first hysterical outburst the night Edmonds captured them, she had shown remarkable composure. Though she was already growing thin from lack of food, she withstood the manhandlings of the coarse-mouthed THRUSH guards with cool reserve. Only after the guards left did she break down and begin to shudder with rage and disgust.

After the first night, Illya and Indra were freed from the posts and allowed a period of exercise in a wire-fence enclosure to the rear of the hut. Here too were the latrine facilities, which they were allowed to use on a set schedule, accompanied by guards armed with machine pistols. A thick planting of jungle shrubs grew up all around the outside of this fence. Consequently it was impossible for Illya to see very much of the THRUSH station.

He was able to catch a glimpse or two between the shrubs. He spotted a couple of concrete-block buildings, a crudely surfaced concrete parking area where a jeep and two small lorries stood. The rain forest rose thick and dank beyond these vehicles, confirming Edmonds' statement that the THRUSH headquarters was fairly well isolated in the jungle of Purjipur.

Food was brought in three times a day. Usually the meal consisted of some grain cakes and weak tea. Illya and the girl ate it only because they had nothing else. When they weren't outside, the two prisoners remained tied to the posts. Illya tested the leather thongs as he sat by the hour and watched the jungle through the small window.

The thongs were tough. And there was nothing within reach–no nail, no rock–nothing which he could use to wear the tough leather away.

Several times a day THRUSH personnel who looked a cut above the mentality of the guards would come into the hut to pick out half a dozen

monkey cages and take them away. Shortly afterward there was usually a sound of a truck starting up. This kind of thing happened with such regularity that Illya assumed it was part of a pre-scheduled plan to loose the plague-ridden beasts on an ever-increasing number of cities and villages in Purjipur.

And always, as a never-ending background, there was the chattering of the monkeys left in the cages. They shook the little bars and leaped about, their eyes fever-bright.

Illya was always conscious of the necessity to escape. He devoted almost every waking moment to thinking about ways and means to accomplish it. Finally he settled on the only feasible way an attempt could be made.

It involved one certain guard, a husky, flat-nosed Eurasian who always brought them their evening meal. What gave Illya a bit of hope was the simple fact that the man was a heavy cigarette smoker. To light his cigarettes the man used a big brushed-chrome American lighter.

The lighter was the key to it. That and the pistol which all guards carried.

Illya slept only fitfully at night. The days had a tendency to blur into one another. He wasn't sure, but he thought it was the fifth day of their imprisonment when Dantez Edmonds came to the hut around noon.

The man wore his white suit and shoes, and this ensemble was further adorned by a white silk handkerchief in his jacket breast pocket, a white linen shirt of open weave and a white-on-white tie. Illya thought there was something savagely ironic about whiteness being associated with a man of Edmonds' temper and political persuasion.

"Ah," Edmonds said, fluttering his hands at them as he stepped through the door, "still faring well, are we? Delighted to see it!" Over his shoulder he called "Chandra!"

Mr. Chandra ducked in through the door. Indra was sitting against the upright beam to which she was tied. At the sight of the man whom she'd trusted, she stiffened, and her haggard face hardened. There was no mistaking the hate in her eyes.

Mr. Chandra met her glance briefly, then turned aside, trying for an air of concern he couldn't quite achieve. Illya thought to himself that Indra Bal was even more attractive when she was angry. She was a courageous young woman.

Dantez Edmonds caught the little byplay, chuckled. “I can sympathize with you, Miss Bal. If one of my trusted servants were shown to be a traitor, I am afraid I would be more than angry. I would be vengeful to the point of doing murder.” He touched his wispy goatee. “Perhaps this is why THRUSH will ultimately succeed. We have ways and means of guaranteeing absolute and unquestioned loyalty. Such niceties as loyalty and honor are trifles when compared with the prime motivator of all men–fear.”

There was a faintly maniacal gleam in Edmonds’ eyes as he leaned toward Chandra and said, “Am I not right?”

Mr. Chandra flushed from his cheeks down to his high collar. “Quite right, sir.”

“There’s a THRUSH agent who knows his place,” Edmonds chuckled. “As for you two, I am exceedingly sorry that I have been unable to devote more attention to you these past few days. We have been extremely busy, placing our little darlings–” a gesture at the cages “–where they will do the most good. You will be delighted to know, for example, that plague is now widespread in the capital.

“Last night the death toll had risen to one hundred and seventy-five killed in fires, lootings and political altercations alone.

“The plague itself has already disposed of well over a thousand souls. The neighboring country is being blamed, thanks to that well-placed evidence which I believe I mentioned. Purjipur’s ministry of defense has issued a total mobilization order for the army and air-force. Actual hostilities should be underway within the week.”

Edmonds rocked back and forth on his heels, a self-congratulatory smile on his emaciated face. Illya glowered, said nothing.

“Come, come, Kuryakin!” Edmonds exclaimed. “Compliment us on our outstanding job!”

“You’re a madman. Worse than the worse of THRUSH.”

“Thank you kindly!” And Edmonds tittered.

Indra Bal hid her face in her hands, turning away. Her shoulders shook violently.

Edmonds continued, “I really came here to fetch several of my little friends. You see, Kuryakin, I’m leaving here today by helicopter. I’m taking a THRUSH plane to the United States. Mr. Chandra, I believe those top six monkeys will do nicely. They look suitably fat and poisonous. The animals,

Mr. Kuryakin, are the ones I will use to dispose of the last of the three who imprisoned me. Waverly, that–"

Enraged, Illya lunged out to the full length of his ankle-thong, reaching for Edmonds' throat. Indra uttered a low shriek. Edmonds danced back out of the way with a mincing step that was surprisingly swift. Illya couldn't quite reach him.

Edmonds' right leg came up in the old, lethal French foot kick. The toe of the shoe caught Illya under the chin with hurting force. With a cry Illya went over backwards. Mr. Chandra darted forward as he fell and kicked him twice in the side.

Illya groaned, rolling from side to side as red agonies flared inside his head. Mr. Chandra was about to deliver a third brutal kick when Edmonds raised a right hand sharply.

"No, Mr. Chandra. No more emotional outbursts, please!"

Mr. Chandra bit his lip. He stepped away from Illya, who was struggling to push himself up on hands and knees. Edmonds whipped the white silk from his breast pocket with a theatrical flourish and mopped his forehead. A thin smile etched his fleshless lips.

"You see, Mr. Chandra, if we respond to this carrion's outbursts we admit that he has succeeded in unsettling us. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is THRUSH with the winning hand now, THRUSH and I, Dantez Edmonds. In a week Asia will be aflame with war. In a month, half the governments in this part of the world will belong to THRUSH. And the sign and symbol of this coming victory, my friend, will be the last death which repays the old score. Waverly is finished."

Spittle flew from Edmonds' lips on the last word. For a long moment the emaciated man trembled there in front of Illya. Finally he straightened, snapped his fingers.

"The cages, Mr. Chandra! As for you two–the moment I return from America, I will have the time to deal with you in the fashion you deserve."

Chandra lifted down the monkey cages, careful to hold them by the sides, away from the bar openings. Edmonds turned smartly and stalked out. Illya dragged himself upright again. Outside, Edmonds raised his voice to give shrill orders.

Two THRUSH guards rushed in to help Chandra with the cages. Shortly the chattering of a helicopter began, grew louder, held steady, then diminished to silence.

“He’s gone,” Illya whispered. “Indra? Can you hear me?”

She nodded with a shudder. “Gone to murder Mr. Waverly as he murdered my uncle.”

“It’s our job to stop the havoc in Purjipur. I have a thought on how we might go about it. I have been hesitating to try because it may be our one chance, and if we fail–” An eloquent shrug finished the sentence. “Now I’m afraid it’s too late to wait for the ideal opportunity. Much too late.”

Illya hitched across the floor toward her. At the end of his thong, he could barely reach out and touch her shoulder. “Do you remember the guard who brings the evening meal? The one who is such a heavy smoker?”

Slowly Indra nodded. Illya Kuryakin lowered his voice and spoke for a long time.

THREE

Night heat drifted in through the hut's barred window. Out in the jungle, animals growled and racketed. The spotlight had been turned on to flood the face of the hut with light. Illya and Indra leaned against the upright beams, pretending to doze. Illya's heart slugged heavily in his chest. For nearly half an hour he'd been anticipating the arrival of the husky, flat-nosed guard. The man was very late tonight.

Illya's palms were filmed with sweat. What was happening in the U.S.? Was Waverly safe? And what had become of Napoleon? Had he died on Bal's estate? *Must put those things out of my mind. They only–*

Noise of footsteps. Illya's head jerked up. The bamboo latch on the hut door rattled. The husky guard appeared. "Dinner time," the guard rumbled. He repeated the same statement every night.

Illya peered through on slitted eyelid. The man wasn't smoking. He deposited the two tin plates on the ground, turned and went back outside into the glare of the small spotlight. He picked up the tin cups of tea and re-entered the hut.

Illya's legs were stuck out in front of him. He tensed. The guard bent down, deposited the tin cups, stood up. He fumbled in his shabby uniform blouse for a pack of Japanese cigarettes and his big brushed-chrome lighter.

Just as the man was applying the lighter to the cigarette Illya struck. With his right foot he kicked hard at the guard's left ankle. The man let out a startled curse, off balance. Illya lunged forward, seized the man's ankle and yanked.

The guard toppled. His lighter dropped from his hand. Illya clamped his left hand over the man's mouth and jabbed his right index finger into the husky neck. A yell of alarm died in the guard's throat as he relaxed, unconscious.

Indra was up, crouching. Illya reached across the inert body, seized the cigarette lighter and thumbed the wheel. There was a spray of sparks, nothing more.

Illya was desperately conscious of the hut's open door, of the unseen presence of the guard who was always stationed outside. Illya thumbed the

wheel again. Nothing happened. Was the thing out of fluid? He bit down on his lower lip and tried once more.

This time a flame leaped up.

Illya applied the flame to the leather thong mid-way along its length. A sharp, burning smell crawled upward. The leather smoldered. A wisp of smoke drifted toward the door. Agitated, the monkeys in the cages were yammering louder than ever.

A shadow stirred outside, fell athwart the spotlight beam. The guard!

Illya dropped the lighter, seized the leather strap with both hands, tugged and tugged until his shoulder sockets started to scream with pain.

Boots clunked outside. The guard was almost at the door–

The thong popped, Illya dove forward over the fallen guard's body just as the guard appeared in the doorway and let out a cry. Illya ripped the fallen guard's pistol from its holster and fired in the time it took the second guard to get his holster flap unfastened. The shot boomed cannon-loud in the damp night air.

The guard clutched his left hip, staggered. Illya dragged him into the hut and neck-chopped him down. From somewhere a voice cried out, querying about the shot. Illya raced over to Indra with the lighter, knelt, started to burn the thong.

"It's a close one from now on, my dear," he said as he worked, managing to convey an air of calm he didn't feel. "Pull at the strap, will you?"

In a second or so they had it broken. Indra rose, leaned against him. They went to the door. Illya led the way outside. Gun in one hand, holding Indra up with the other, he broke into a run to the left, down past the gate to the fenced exercise yard.

They rounded the corner of the fence, darted past heavy shrubbery. Ahead under the beam of a weak floodlight, were several vehicles in the motor pool.

"That jeep is the one we want," he whispered. A siren began somewhere, *whoop*, *whoop*, *whoop.*

"But where will we go?" Indra cried softly.

"If they have trucks there must be a road. We–*look out!"*

He flung her to the ground as two THRUSH guards burst from shrubbery on the right, bringing up their rifles. Illya jumped across Indra's body and fired once, twice.

His first bullet killed one of the guards. The second shot missed. The guard fired. The rifle bullet whispered by Illya's sleeve as he fired again. This time the guard dropped.

All around them there was confusion: noises of men running in darkness; the chattering of the aroused monkeys in the hut behind; the overwhelming howl of the siren. Illya helped Indra up. They bolted for the jeep.

Probably because THRUSH wouldn't number car thieves in its ranks in this isolated part of the world, the keys hung in place. Illya helped the girl in, saw as he jumped in himself that a road ran out of one side of the parking area and disappeared into the jungle.

Men were tumbling out of a concrete blockhouse nearby as Illya turned over the ignition, gunned the jeep to life and sent it roaring off the concrete pad. Another rifle boomed. The bullet spanged the jeep's rear as it jolted off the pad onto a double rutted dirt road.

Illya fought the wheel. He felt as though they were on a roller coaster. He snapped on the headlights as the road carried them into the jungle.

"Hang on," he bawled as the jeep raced along through the leafy tunnel. "I'm going to run her flat out for as long as she holds together."

This was the better part of two minutes. The road, if it could be called that, took a sharp hairpin to the left. The trees closed in above them. Suddenly the jeep began to cough and sputter. Illya strained forward.

"What's the matter?" Indra asked.

Illya's index finger stabbed a dial whose pointer was well below the E marker. "Petrol. We picked one that's low. I'm afraid–"

He didn't get a chance to continue. The jeep slowed down, its engine sputtering. Illya braked to a stop, swinging his head left and right.

Thick tropical jungle on both hands. And a faint radiance coming up the road behind them. Fortunately the road here was hard packed earth. It would show no tire marks if the pursuers went over it rapidly, not scrutinizing it.

"We'll have to go into the forest," he said. "First let's try to gain a little extra time."

Using what little fuel remained, Illya went into reverse. He swung the jeep's hood at the shrubbery along the left shoulder, then accelerated at full speed. "Head down, Indra!"

They plowed into the brush. Illya killed the engine completely. He jumped out. Indra helped him with the camouflage job, spreading branches over the jeep's rear end.

Already the THRUSH lorries were rumbling up around the bend. "If they go fast enough, we may gain a bit of time. Come on."

He seized her hand and pulled her into the cloyingly damp jungle. Indra breathed out raggedly:

"It–isn't safe like this at night. There are wild beasts–"

"I don't know what choice we have." Illya swatted insects bedeviling his cheeks.

They plunged on through the damp, heat-sodden rain forest, growing more weary with every step. After a while they rested for a short time in the low fork of a tree, then pressed on. Several times Illya heard a large animal growling quite close by.

Gradually the night waned. Illya was still slogging ahead, half-carrying Indra. The sky grew light. He judged they might have made four or five miles. Without landmarks, it was hard to tell.

In another few minutes they came to a clearing where the ground was disturbed. Illya discovered a small animal carcass, half eaten, behind the old log on which he set Indra to rest.

Just as he was about to point out the bloody relic, the brush rustled. Out marched a huge, magnificent Bengal tiger. The tiger regarded them with all too evident hunger, licked its chops and growled.

FOUR

The limousine crept around a corner in the fog. Its yellow headlights barely penetrated the murk drifting in from the sea. On the corner just turned, a light pole thrust up like a skeletal finger raised in warning. The car's motor was barely a whisper. Napoleon Solo was sure his own heart was making much more racket.

Mr. Waverly sat on the right in the front seat. He seemed more composed than Solo, saying as he surveyed the dismal, looming fronts of lofts slipping by, "Depressing neighborhood, rather. We haven't seen a single person for blocks."

"It's always deserted down here after midnight," Solo commented. His eyes swept the left side of the street. He saw an alley and, just past it, half a dozen ancient brownstones. They were relics of the time when this area near the Hudson River had been a pleasant neighborhood.

The brownstones looked inhabited. But all of them were dark except one. Frowsy lace curtains of ancient blinds decorated the windows. Solo imagined that behind those curtains lived old, old people who were waiting for the inevitable death of their buildings as yet another shipping warehouse was put up on the valuable land.

The thoughts of death both annoyed and troubled Napoleon Solo. This was no time for mental maundering. He suspected the one lighted brownstone was their target. Illya might be there.

"Perhaps you should make a check of your forces, Mr. Solo," Waverly suggested.

"Good idea."

Solo pulled in to the curb, lifted a mike from its dashboard prongs. He depressed a stud. "This is task force leader to first station. Please report."

Solo had split his half dozen operatives–the best men available for local duty–into two-man teams.

The first of these operatives reported now:

"First station to task force leader. We've been in position for an hour and a half right behind Number 47. There's a small fenced yard out there. That's where we are. Right behind the fence is an eight foot drop to the

river. No sign of a dock or a pier. If anybody's inside, they've been there since before the phone call, over."

Solo called the next station, two men on the roofs of an adjoing brownstone. The report was the same. So it was with the last two operatives on duty somewhere on this very street, crouched in doorways or truck bays where Solo couldn't see them.

Number 47 was indeed the brownstone where a light gleamed feebly behind second-floor blinds. No one had gone in or come out recently. He cautioned the teams to remain alert for his signal and snapped off the mike. "What time is it, sir?" Solo asked, busy checking his long-muzzle pistol.

Mr. Waverly consulted his big platinum wristwatch. "Twenty-seven minutes past three."

"And we're to be there at three-thirty on the dot."

Mr. Waverly nodded. He stroked his long upper lip a moment as he studied the front of the lighted building. The drifting fog made it look insubstantial, like something out of a nightmare.

"I really wonder now whether Mr. Kuryakin is in there," he said.

Solo swung round on the seat, his eyebrow hooking up. "Sir, I assumed you believed–"

"–that Mr. Dantez Edmonds is a man of his word? Nonsense, Mr. Solo. What evidence will support this? All we had was a series of phone calls, the most recent shortly before midnight this evening, confirming arrangements for the transfer of this rather large sum of money."

Mr. Waverly patted an unusually thick attache case resting by his left leg. "We are taking Edmonds' word that he has smuggled Mr. Kuryakin into New York and into this house. Personally, if I were Edmonds, I would do no such thing. It's too easy for the other side to suspect a trap and prepare for it, as we have done."

Mr. Waverly's gesture was meant to indicate the various teams of operatives stationed around the brownstone. He went on:

"I have proceeded with our phase of the negotiations as though I were a simple, trusting soul who swallowed every word Edmonds put forth. There are really two unknowns in the equation, Mr. Solo. First, is Edmonds inside that house as he promised he would be? If there is even a remote chance that he is, we must play the fools and try to trap him. The second unknown is simply that Dantez Edmonds is quite mad."

"I still say THRUSH wouldn't trust a crazy man to–"

“Mad, Mr. Solo, on the subject of personal revenge.” Waverly tapped his chest. “He wants me. Shall we satisfy him?” With a dour smile, he hefted the attache case and stepped out the car.

Solo caught up with him, conscious of the eerie way in which their footsteps clacked on the damp street. Carefully Solo reached into his pocket. He adjusted the calibrations of his rod-shaped communicator by feel alone. The communicator was now set so that a touch of one of its signal studs would immediately start the little transmitter broadcasting to the communicators carried by the two-man teams. They’d come on the double.

“In other words, sir,” Solo said as he followed Waverly up the brownstone steps, “You feel there is a good possibility that Illya is really dead.”

“At very least, I would wager he is not here,” Waverly replied. “I don’t want to sound ruthless. But this is a matter of plain fact. The most important thing to U.N.C.L.E. now is the capture of Dantez Edmonds, and putting an end to his activities with those infected monkeys. Surely the recent riots and the mounting war tensions in Purjipur indicate the urgency of–oh, here we are.”

They had arrived at the top of the steps. Waverly reached out and twisted the bell-key. Somewhere far back on the brownstone, a bell jangled.

The pit of Napoleon Solo’s stomach felt leaden. Well, Waverly had only confirmed what he’d suspected ever since the first ransom message came in from Edmonds a couple of days ago. Illya was dead, and this was an elaborate shadow-play designed to bring Waverly into Edmonds’ hands.

Once more Waverly tried the bell. No one came to answer. Finally Solo eased around past his chief, touched the door handle. He pushed the door inward and stepped away from it.

“All appears in order,” Mr. Waverly said in an overly loud voice.

Before Solo could stop him, he was inside. Napoleon Solo went after him, pistol up. The foyer was practically pit-black. A single light bulb gleamed high up at the head of the second landing, revealing a staircase littered with pieces of old packing crate. A sour smell of garbage floated in the air. Solo glided forward, testing every step.

Suddenly a voice crackled out of the black at his elbow: “Gentlemen, welcome to you. This of course is your host–”

“Edmonds?” Waverly snapped. “Where the devil are you?”

“My voice is coming to you through an amplifier hooked into the old speaking tubes of this former apartment building,” the faintly effeminate voice continued. “As you pass up the staircase, an electronic device will check to make sure there are no more than two present. It would not be safe for more than two of you to attempt to climb the stairs, be assured of that. You will find me waiting in the rear room of the second floor. We will finish our transactions there, and Mr. Kuryakin will be turned over to you.”

Listening to the tinny voice, Solo whispered under his breath, “Liar.”

“I have the money Edmonds.” Alexander Waverly hefted the attache case.

There was silence.

A big liner hooted, going down the Hudson on the river outside the building. Mr. Waverly sighed and glanced over his shoulder. “Nothing for it, Mr. Solo. Second floor rear?”

Briskly Waverly started upward, swinging the case and whistling under his breath.

Solo climbed after him, watching in fascination as the case waggled back and forth in Mr. Waverly’s hand. His chief was almost jaunty, carrying a hundred thousand dollars in tens and twenties.

That money had been the subject of Edmonds second-to-last phone call to headquarters . During the final call tonight, Edmonds had finally given them the rendezvous address, and Napoleon Solo had rushed to get his two-man teams in place.

Swinging the case, Mr. Waverly reached the landing. There he paused until Solo caught up. Side by side, they moved toward the rear, and a door with paint peeling from it. At the door they paused again. Mr. Waverly reached out with his left hand, turned the knob. The door squeaked open.

The two men looked into a plain, unfurnished room from which even the carpeting had been stripped. The room was quite bright, lit by a bulb of several hundred watts dangling from a cord. Mr. Waverly shrugged and stepped inside.

The hair on the back of Solo’s neck itched furiously. His long-muzzle pistol gripped tight in his right hand, he edged in after his chief.

Waverly looked around and raised an eyebrow. “Not a soul here. Edmonds is–”

The voice crackled again from hidden speakers: “I am now coming to you courtesy of an amplifier system which is connected with another room

in this building. But I do have a little reception committee for you–”

And Edmonds dissolved into a wild cackling as a panel at waist height in the wall sprang open with a bang.

“And I for you,” snapped Waverly, bringing up the attache case. His thumb pressed the handle. He threw the case into the opening in the wall.

“Back, Mr. Solo!” Waverly cried and crashed against Solo, bowling him into the opposite wall. With a thunderous explosion and a puff of acrid smoke, the attache case blew up inside the opening.

Something small, furry, chittering had been leaping out of that opening at the moment the attache case whizzed by, the moment just before the explosion. Or had it been several somethings?

Solo was dazed. He leaned against the wall. It took him a few seconds to interpret what his senses had taken in–a half dozen monkeys spilling out of the secret opening. Solo glanced around. He counted one, two, three, four monkey corpses.

“So there wasn’t any money in that case,” he breathed.

“Not a cent, Mr. Solo. Only explosives. Alert your teams.”

For one wild moment, Napoleon Solo had been afraid that the plague-monkeys were loose around them. It was difficult to see because of the smoke billowing from the hole in the wall. He was relieved to know that Waverly’s careful planning and quick thinking had taken care of the little beasts.

Solo whipped out his pocket communicator. He hit the appropriate stud, let the signal broadcast for perhaps ten seconds. Then he switched onto a speech Channel. “This is task force leader to all stations. Seal off all exits. Dantez Edmonds is somewhere in the building. He–”

“Correction,” rattled the hideously familiar voice from the hidden loudspeakers. “Dantez Edmonds is fifteen miles out past Long Island Sound, and monitoring what is happening there by special long-distance electronic equipment provided on this THRUSH powerboat. Very clever of you to come armed Alexander. Though not entirely unexpected, I assure you.”

“You had no intention of ransoming Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly thundered back.

“Of course I didn’t. I am surprised you came this far.”

“I thought perhaps we might trap you.” As usual, Waverly sounded calm, even phlegmatic, in the midst of difficulties. “It appears I was

mistaken."

"And you put those diseased monkeys behind that secret panel," Solo shouted. "Where's Illya? Still in Purjipur?"

"My God!" Mr. Waverly cried suddenly.

Napoleon Solo whirled. Wide-eyed, Mr. Waverly was staring down at the floor. One of the pestilential monkeys had survived after all. Chittering and hopping, it was backing away from Alexander Waverly's left trouser cuff, retreating into the thick smoke.

Waverly's cuff was ripped, torn as though savagely bitten. Solo's hand went out to his chief's arm. "Sir, did the thing –?"

"Yes, Mr. Solo." Waverly turned ashen. "I didn't see it. All of a sudden there it was, sinking its filthy little teeth in me."

"What's that I hear?" Edmonds cracked over the amplifier. "Have you met one of my little darlings after all? Splendid! One can do the job as neatly as six."

Horrified, Solo kneeled as Mr. Waverly gingerly pulled up his trouser leg. Solo drew in a raw breath. The monkey's teeth had pierced the flesh. Already the little half-moon row of wounds was beginning to mottle, turn dark. Solo spun around, spied the monkey capering in a corner, almost obscured by the smoke. Solo aimed once and shot it to death.

Abruptly Mr. Waverly gasped, seized Napoleon's shoulder. "Help me, Mr. Solo. My leg's like jelly–" He went down, hitting his head hard on the floor before Solo could catch him.

Louder and louder, Edmonds laughter boiled up. It filled the room, bounced off the walls. Somewhere in the old brownstone footsteps rang out as Solo's two-man teams penetrated, coming too late.

Solo continued to stare down at Alexander Waverly's exposed leg. The wound was just above the top of Mr. Waverly's calf-length sock. A three-inch patch of flesh around the wound was beginning to turn scaly black-purple, beginning to shine with little poisonous beads of moisture.

Waverly moaned. Standing helpless and enraged with Edmonds' laughter thundering from miles away, Solo thought, *God help us, the plague germ's in him–And there's no antidote.*

ACT IV
DEATH'S JUNGLE RENDEVOUS

As he confronted the tiger in the dawn-lit clearing, Illya Kuryakin found it somewhat difficult to sound very coherent.

Indra Bal's golden-amber skin had turned even more pale. "Don't make any sudden movements. Normally he wouldn't turn on us, but we disturbed him finishing his meal. He's angry."

As if to reinforce this point, the tiger opened its huge wet red maw and let out an extremely sinister kind of combination belch and growl. It dug the great claws of its forefeet into the ground, scribing vicious little parallel channels to indicate its mounting wrath.

"Let's try backing up," Illya whispered. "Very slowly, a step at a time."

"Get your gun ready," Indra replied.

She reached out slowly, her eyes never leaving those of the tiger. She caught his free hand. When she squeezed his fingers, Illya moved his right foot backward, at the same time Indra sidestepped around the half-eaten carcass.

What bothered Illya more than anything else was the stopping power of the stolen THRUSH pistol. He wasn't sure at all that the caliber was heavy enough to be effective.

The tiger dug its claws in deeper in the earth. A silky ripple went down its flanks, as though its muscles were readying.

Squeeze. Indra's hand constricted on his again. They took another backward step.

Illya's forehead ran with sweat. The gun felt ludicrously small and ineffectual in his hand. The tiger's big yellow eyes shone like a pair of moons as it regarded the two of them with open dislike.

Squeeze. They took one more step backwards.

Squeeze. Another.

After a total of five steps, the tiger still hadn't moved. Illya was beginning to feel things were going swimmingly. Besides, they could hardly get worse. Illya squeezed again and he stepped backwards straight into a shallow depression. Off balance, he flailed. He tried to right himself, couldn't. As he fell, his trigger finger constricted.

The pistol thundered.

Illya was down on his back. Startled by the gunshot, the tiger roared and leaped. It came straight at him, a striped blur of black and gold. Desperately he rolled to one side. Indra screamed in terror.

The tiger hit the ground where he'd been a moment ago. One of its flaying claws ripped his clothing over his ribs, bringing excruciating pain. The tiger lunged around so that its head was quite close to Illya's. The immense jaws went open. The huge saber-like fangs glistened with slaver. The monstrous eyes glared. A raw, fleshy stench poured out of the mouth.

Down came the mighty head, the jaws closing, flashing at Illya's throat. Illya jerked his gun hand up, aimed into the tiger's open jaws and fired, fired, fired again.

The first bullets drove the tiger back. Illya had time to scramble up. The animal had tremendous stamina. It came at him again, even though its jaws were foaming with blood.

Illya felt a sudden, flashing twinge of intense pity for the great, proud animal. At the moment he realized he was going to have to kill it, he felt bitterly sorry. His hand shook a little as he aimed again from a standing position. He fired the rest of the ammunition at the tiger's head.

With a roar and a thud, the dying beast hit the ground. Its growls grew weaker every moment, Illya turned away, shaking his head. He caught Indra's hand and pulled her against him. She was shuddering violently. His own hand was none too steady as he headed her toward the trees, wanting to leave the awful, blood-drenched clearing behind.

He stroked her hair as they staggered along. Indra said: "I don't know where we are. I don't know where, I don't know."

"We'll find our way."

"How? *How?"*

There was only one answer, futile as it might sound: "By walking."

Illya and Indra wandered lost and feverish in the rain forest for the better of three days. Fortunately there were no more harrowing incidents with animals, and no further encounters with THRUSH troops. In one of his more lucid moments, Illya realized that Dantez Edmonds' associates must have decided that pursuit was unnecessary, that the fugitives would probably die in the jungle.

Toward sundown of the third day they stumbled onto a little river trading station run by an old Englishman left over from the colonial days. He had a shortwave radio. Using it, a dazed, almost incoherent Illya Kuryakin called New York and contacted Napoleon Solo.

After their exchange of startled, surprised greetings–"You're alive!" "Of course." "But I thought you–" –Illya learned the grim news.

Mr. Waverly had been bitten by one of Edmonds' plague-monkeys. He was hovering on the edge of death while U.N.C.L.E. research men labored on a crash basis to try to isolate and process an antidotal serum.

Edmonds had disappeared from the New York area. He was presumed heading back for Asia, where war was about to erupt on Purjipur's border.

Illya gave Solo the approximate coordinates of Edmonds' jungle headquarters. The old trader was familiar with the primitive jungle back roads, and with the air of an old tattered map, was able to help Illya isolate the probable location, based upon Illya's recollection of the configuration of the road he'd followed in escaping.

Illya relayed all the information to Solo, who promised to hop an U.N.C.L.E. plane for Purjipur and close in. But Illya didn't hear that part. He'd fainted.

The old trader stood over him, wringing his hands and scratching his beard. Indra Bal hurriedly inquired whether the station's first aid kit contained any antibiotics, specifically sulfa. Fortunately for Illya, it did.

TWO

The old Trader's name was P.C. Pfolkerstone. He harrumphed when he spoke. "Are you there, sir? I say my good fellow, can you hear me? Are you there?"

With his pocket communicator close to his mouth, Napoleon Solo barked back, "I'm here. What happened?"

"Tube failure. Deuced lucky I had a spare. Trust I'm coming through now?"

"Finally," Solo breathed. "I've been calling for an hour."

And so he had, seated there by the oval window in the lonely gloom of the U.N.C.L.E. jet which had whisked him out of Manhattan hours ago.

A thin rind of moon gleamed against the double solex glass. Below were coastal lights, and the wavering parallelism of waves foam-topped and moon drenched on the Indian Ocean. They had refueled twice already on the flight.

An hour or so ago, the little trading station with which Solo had been in communication for nearly the entire journey had blacked out. Fortunately the difficulty was now repaired.

Solo felt relieved. But he still experienced the incredible weight of the pressures on him: doubt about Illya's condition; uncertainty as to whether the agents whom his signal had alerted in Purjipur's capital city could indeed find Edmonds' headquarters once they got into the jungle. What gnawed on Solo most of all was the desperate knowledge that Mr. Waverly was sinking deeper into a coma with every hour that passed.

Solo remembered the scene vividly. Lying there in the hospital room in New York, cheeks white as the tile of the walls, Mr. Waverly seemed at rest. But the poisons were coursing through his body. His skin was blotching over wider and wider areas. His stamina was tremendous for a man his age, but Solo doubted that he could hang on much longer.

P.C. Pfolkerstone broke into the silence. "Mr. Solo? Your friend's coming round. Let me feel his forehead."

A lengthy pause.

"Splendid! The antibiotic's taking effect. His fever's down." Another pause, and a confusion of voices over scratchy interference. Then the

garrulous voiced trader again: “He’s up. He shouldn’t be, but he wants to talk with you–”

“Napoleon?” That was Illya, hollow-sounding over the distance.

Alone in the jet’s cabin, Napoleon Solo had the eerie feeling that he was lost in some limbo, conversing with a dead soul. He shook his head. The pressure at his temples continued without letup.

He reminded himself that he was on the last leg now. He was headed into Purjipur’s capital in a desperate final attempt to locate and stop Dantez Edmonds.

He already knew the perilous situation in the country over which the jet was ghosting like a moon-washed metal bird. Armies poised at the borders. Plague in the villages and towns. Civil strife spreading. And worse to come, if Edmonds couldn’t be caught, and unmasked, and the hand of Thrush checked.

Solo dragged himself out of his fatigued lethargy to answer Illya: “I’m here. You were the one I wasn’t sure about.”

“I feel quite a bit better now, thanks. Mr. Bal’s niece isn’t awake, though. I’m afraid we’ll have to get her to a hospital quickly. Mr. Pfolkerstone and I are trying to work something out. He’s a nice old chap. We got acquainted while I was raving out of my head and trying to radio you the first time–” Illya still sounded a bit dazed. Solo cut in on him sharply:

“Illya, Mr. Waverly’s dying.’

A sharp intake of breath, barely audible over the static. “No change then?”

“I was in contact with New York just before Pfolkerstone’s radio came back on. No change. The entire organization’s on a twenty-four hour crash alert. The tech people at the Isle de Mal think they can isolate the plague antidote. But whether they can do it in time, that’s the question. They didn’t do any developmental work on the remedy because they had no intention of turning the strain over to U.N.C.L.E. Operations for use.”

“What do you plan, Napoleon?”

“We’ll land at the airfield in the capital. It’s in the middle of the riot district but the local station has managed to wheedle a company of militia so we’ll get down okay. The men I’ve got waiting will have trucks. We’ll head into the jungle more or less along the lines you laid down earlier. Try to locate Edmonds’ jungle headquarters and surround–”

Just then, Napoleon Solo's neck crawled.

For the past several moments the door to the flight deck had been open, leaking a thin pencil of light onto the wine colored carpet of the cabin. A strange citrus-like aroma drifted out of the crack in the doorway. With a start Solo realized that someone had come into the cabin and was standing just a few feet away near the bulkhead, listening intently.

Solo glanced up, trying not to show how startled he was. The man in the shadows spoke: "there won't be any trouble finding Mr. Edmonds' headquarters, Solo. None at all."

The man's voice had a flat, impersonal quality. Solo forced a laugh. He shifted in his seat ever so slightly moving his right hand near the pocket where he kept his long-muzzle pistol. He let his pocket communicator fall.

The cabin air ventilators whistled. The jets echoed their keening. The moon flashed and flared off the oval windows.

"Time for a stretch, Rickley?" Solo wanted to know.

"Time for a little more than that. Solo."

Solo clicked his tongue. "Um. Is your co-pilot handling the aircraft now?"

"The automatic pilot is handling the aircraft, Solo," said the pilot. He was a tall, rangy individual with a saturnine face. Suddenly the man's right hand shifted forward. "That lemon tang you smell is a little gas capsule."

Rickley's right hand came all the way out into a beam of moonlight. The massive .45 automatic shone deadly-blue and heavy in it.

Solo shifted again, his right hand dropping closer to his pocket. His communicator hit the carpet and rolled. Like a midget voice muffled inside a box, Illya's voice grew faint: "Napoleon? *Napoleon!* Mr. Pfolkerstone, I'm afraid there's something wrong with–"

Rickley slid his left foot forward and stamped down on the communicator, smashing it.

Solo's face was angry. "You've been an U.N.C.L.E. pilot for years.'

"Seven years to be exact. I was trained and dropped into position by THRUSH a good deal before that." Rickley smiled. He had rather large, yellowed teeth. "There's always a time for the double to surface, Solo. That's why we go to ground in the first place. Mr. Edmonds got a cable from THRUSH Central. They monitored your traffic with Kuryakin in Manhattan before we took off. I was given the order to surface and stop you. I didn't draw this flight. The regular pilot–

“Rickley shrugged. “They’ll find him knifed in the hangar, I suppose. No harm done. He was a bachelor.”

Rickley’s horse teeth shone moist and hideous as he added, “I gave the co-pilot a lethal dose of gas. You won’t get quite that much. We’re diverting to a field in the jungle. Mr. Edmonds will be there to welcome you.”

Unwinding, Napoleon Solo was out of the aisle seat and charging. His free fist blurred for Rickley’s belly while his other hand fumbled to bring the pistol into position. Rickley took a chance and fired in the pressurized cabin.

The bullet slammed Solo’s wrist. He let out a cry. The slug went *cha-chunk* as it plowed into the thick upholstery of one of the nearby seats.

Blood sprayed from Solo’s wrist, slicking his gun butt. He accidentally dropped the pistol when he was still a foot or so from Rickley. The pilot’s protruding teeth glared in the moonlight filtering through the window as Solo hit out at him.

The man backed away suddenly, absorbing only a fraction of the power of Solo’s punch. Solo lunged on by, spinning in the aisle. His wrist hurt hellishly where the bullet had nicked bone.

From behind, Rickley chopped down. The .45 barrel hit like a streak of fire across Solo’s neck. He plowed the carpet on his face.

He tried to roll over on his back. From high above, grinning, Rickley shoved the .45 into the belt of his flight suit. He pulled a pale gray football-shaped capsule from his pocket, cracked it with his thumb.

“This’ll keep you from waking up and causing trouble every half hour.”

Little gray-yellow whorls of gas leaked from cracks in the capsule. Rickley dropped it straight at Solo’s face.

Rickley covered his mouth with one whipping motion of his hand. He jumped over Solo and backed toward the rear of the compartment. Solo struggled, cursed, tried to sit up. His arms and legs were already soggy. The citrus smell gagged him as the capsule plopped onto his chest and fumed.

He tried to roll away from it, growing more feeble every second. The odor of lemon grove rose up around him, and drowned him in darkness.

THREE

The wrist which had been shot was bandaged. Napoleon Solo could smell the unguent, feel the chafe of the tightly-taped gauze around flesh and bone. He was dizzy. He tried to open his eyes, managed after a moment. His face wrenched into a pattern of horror and disbelief.

They'd hung him up. By iron manacles whose other ends were fastened to one of the crossbars at the top of this medium-size cage of bamboo in which he was imprisoned. They'd ripped off his shirt and coat, shoes and socks, leaving him only his trousers. Sweat and grime smeared together on his chest.

The air was humid, stifling. He heard rather than saw the breathing and rustling of the rainforest. He knew he was up-country, in the Purjipur jungle.

It was difficult to see much of anything. A powerful spotlight angling in from outside the cage blinded him. He did hear a gnashing of truck gears, the crunch of booted feet on earth, sounds of effort–grunts, curses and a soft undercurrent of commotion, as of vast stirrings out there beyond the glaring periphery of the spotlight.

"Good evening, Solo. How do you like our little arrangement?"

Solo's tongue felt thick. The tips of his toes barely touched the bottom of the cage. Already his shoulder sockets were fiery with pain.

The voice blurred on, men laughing coarsely somewhere behind it: "This is our Purjipur station. We use this outdoor cage for testing our little beasts. We also incarcerate an occasional reluctant lower-echelon member of THRUSH. Or perhaps you aren't aware you have companions in there. You do seem a little dazed."

Like a white sword dazzling before his eyes, the searchlight was swung so that it shone into the section of the cage directly ahead of him. Solo saw that the cage was divided in half by a vertical steel mesh. On the other side, gibbous shadow-shapes capered and extended their clawed fur hands toward him.

Monkeys! A pair of black silhouettes. Plague monkeys, there on the other side of the mesh.

Solo noticed something else. The monkeys were bloated, almost lethargic, except for the questing movements of their forepaws. They scraped their paws against the mesh again and again, trying to reach him.

One of the creatures turned its head into the spotlight glare. Where its eyes should have been, there were only slime-covered purplish patches of scabrous tissue.

Solo's voice came out as dry croaking; "Edmonds?"

"Of course, my friend. Who else?"

And with a whip of the spotlight mounted on a three-foot stanchion outside the cage, Edmonds turned the beam around 180 degrees until it pointed at his own face.

The truck roar continued. Men passed by carrying crates and bales. Most of them snickered or laughed outright at Solo's predicament. And like an actor, resplendent in his white suit and unblemished white shoes, Dantez Edmonds postured in the circle of light, his little wisp of goatee blowing in the fetid night wind.

"Rickley nearly botched the job, the dolt," Edmonds said with a grin. "But we did get you here after all, didn't we?

"The monkeys in there with you are some poor devils who now and then succumb completely to the plague-strain. No resistance. We let them die naturally. Or we use them to discipline–but no matter. I suspect everything is clear to you. You U.N.C.L.E. chaps are bright. Have you discovered a way to save Alexander Waverly?" Edmonds threw back his head and guffawed. "I think not."

"Is this routine with the cage supposed to make me crawl, Edmonds?"

"Not at all. It's a little exhibition for the benefit of my men. As you may be able to see and hear, they are working hard. Our time in Purjipur is finished. The Parliamentary Congress issued a declaration of war against the neighboring state at six this evening. We're striking the camp and moving on. East Africa next."

Edmonds stepped nearer the bars, almost mincing. He mopped his upper lip with the handkerchief from his breast pocket.

"I told you I'd kill them one by one. I have. But I have done more than that. I have shown THRUSH Central that under my leadership, we can make our final thrust for victory."

Dantez Edmonds' pale white hand gripped the bamboo bar near Napoleon Solo, constricting there. "The plague will be rampant over three

quarters of the globe in half a year. Then how will U.N.C.L.E. contain the panic? Answer that!”

Head bursting with pain, Napoleon Solo couldn’t. The night was turning into a chaos of sounds: men calling to other men to get aboard. Somewhere high up against the misted stars, Solo thought he heard the whistling scream of a squadron of jet fighter planes. The Purjipur air force flashing toward the border to join the war?

“There’ll be others on the way here,” Solo said. His wounded wrist burned.

“Of course,” Edmonds answered. “I was not naive enough to believe that you were the exclusive owner of the information which Mr. Kuryakin provided you over the short wave. But you were the one assigned to lead the attack, Mr. Solo. Your agents are probably still waiting for you in the capitol. Before other groups of U.N.C.L.E. operatives can get here, we’ll be away. We really need only a few hours and your capture has given us that. Transport planes are coming in across Nepal this moment.

“They’ll land on the strip where Rickley put his stolen plane down. By the time anyone shows up to find your carcass, I’ll be flying over the Red Sea to the next country my little darlings are going to infest for THRUSH.”

Edmonds tittered, saliva on his lips glaring in the spotlight. Solo didn’t know what to say. Pain tormented him. What was the use of retorting anyway? He knew he was going to die. The best he could do now was to die with some semblance of honor and professional calm.

A squad of THRUSH guards marched past. Each carried two of the monkey cages.

“There go the last, I believe,” Edmonds said, inclining his head. A call out of the dark indicated that the last truck was loading. Edmonds sidled near the bamboo again. He reached up toward a handle which connected with a steel rod. The rod ran across the top of the cage. The mesh was held in place by this horizontal rod plus two other vertical ones at either side of the cage.

“I won’t need to remove more than the top rod, Solo. The mesh will drop sufficiently. The poor infected creatures are mad for food, and they’ll climb across. They’ll bite you where you hang. Stiff upper lip and all that, eh?” Edmonds’ face wrenched. “What sloppy bosh!”

Very slowly, Napoleon Solo said, “You can go–”

The final words were drowned out. Edmonds let out a high-pitched, insane squeal of rage. With a jerk he pulled the horizontal rod out of the top of the cage. The upper part of the mesh sagged. The first of the diseased monkeys scrambled up over it, dropped gibbering and chittering at Solo's feet.

Off in the darkness Edmond's screamed with laughter. The infected monkey bared its teeth, the monkey came scrabbling forward, now a foot from Solo's bare toes.

Now eight inches.

Now six.

With all the strength left in him, Solo constricted his arm muscles and jerked his legs up into a hip position, hard against his chest.

The monkey's forepaw batted empty air. The swollen little beast yipped with rage. Its companion came clambering over the mesh. The first monkey batted at Solo's dangling body again. Tight, tight against his chest, Solo's leg muscles began to ache.

In just a matter of seconds the strain on his wrists, particularly the wounded one, became nearly unbearable. The two monkeys kept batting the air, trying to jump up toward him. Only their infected heaviness made it difficult for them, and kept Solo alive.

Far off in the darkness, a voice cried out in sudden alarm. It sounded like Mr. Chandra. The strain on Solo's wrists was too great. A foot below, the monkeys swiped at him more and more frantically.

Boots pounded on the path near the cage. Hanging onto life with what little strength was left to him, Solo realized that some new element had been injected into the hurly-burly of the retreat from the station. Men were running, cursing. Through the steamy dark came a sudden rip of a light machine-gun.

Over it all, like a knife, was Edmonds' sudden howl of anger: "It's that filthy Kuryakin! *Over there, behind that tree!* Kill him, you mush-gutted imbeciles. *Kill* him!"

"He's not alone," Mr. Chandra bawled. "There are some men all around–"

Then pandemonium, as more gunshots burst and the confusion of voices increased. Solo's heart was thudding with wild, crazy relief.

He didn't know how Illya could be here, except under the guidance of the old trader. Pfolkerstone. He only knew he heard the name, and he yelled

it with the last burst of power left in his lungs: “Illya? Illya Kuryakin! Somebody! This is Solo. In the cage with the spotlight!”

Hearing him cry out, the monkeys below grew even more angered. Solo’s body was unbending at the waist despite his best efforts. He let out a guttural cry of agony, trying to pull his legs back up once again. But he was too bone weary.

Slowly, slowly, his knees dropped level with his bare stomach. His feet were actually shaking from the strain. He felt the furry paw of one of the monkeys scrape across the sole of his foot as it lowered toward their white-slavering jaws. There was nothing he could do. His muscles had given out–

Stuttering, a machine pistol exploded out past the spotlight. There was a dull *platt* below, then another. Bullets beat into the bodies of the monkeys. They flopped over like grotesque little stuffed toys, dead.

A scarecrow shadow leaped toward the cage. The man who had done the shooting raced in front of the spotlight. “Napoleon? Napoleon. Is that you?”

Gingerly Solo unbent, uttering a long sigh as the weight of his body came down ay last on the tips of his toes. A bone creaked and popped at the sudden unbending. He was back in the hanging position, arms still locked in the manacles over his head.

“It isn’t the daring young man on the you-know-what, Illya. Get me out of here.”

Illya turned the spotlight so it shone on Solo’s face and upper arms. “Manacles. I don’t see any way to unlock–wait.”

He ran forward, his weapon cradled in the crook of his arm. Keys jangled. “These must do it.”

Illya pulled the ring off a small nail driven into the outside of one of the uprights. Quickly he stepped through the bamboo door hinged with rope. His face was pale, unhealthy, the eyes circled with deep purplish rings of fatigue. Solo sucked in deep draughts of air as Illya reached up to fit the key in the left manacle.

In a moment the steel circlet snapped open. Solo let out a gasp. He rocked all the way down onto the soles of his feet.

“Blessed relief, as they say in the headache commercials. How the devil did you get here?”

“With the assistance of my friend the trader, naturally.”

“You look like the proverbial walking death.”

Illya's smile was humorless. "Actually I'm being kept alive by drugs."

Out in the darkness headlight beams flashed and heavy truck motors roared.

"Edmonds and crew–"

Solo swung swiftly toward the cage door.

Illya clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Easy, my friend. There are enough of us to take care of them. One full 'copter load from the capitol came in half an hour ago to get into position. Another landed on the strip two minutes ago. Pfolkerstone and I flashed beams to show them the way. He's an old warhorse."

"How did you get here?" Solo blurted. "I mean, how did you know–"

"Time for that later."

Illya unlocked the other cuff. Solo threw the steel manacles away, trying to chafe some life back into his tingling lower arms. All at once he felt dizzy.

Illya said something about going back to direct the activities of his men. He started through the cage door ahead of Solo. Out of the dark, screaming his hate, came Mr. Chandra.

Chandra's turban was awry. A great glittering *kris* knife was locked by its hilt in both his shaking hands.

Men down the path shouted for Chandra to stop. Evidently he'd seen Illya and Solo emerging from the cage and decided to spend what life he had left taking revenge against the people who had upset his master's plotting.

Illya whipped his head up as the kris sliced the air straight for his neck. Chandra charged in, amber face distorted and foam-lipped with fury.

"Get down!" Solo gave Illya the shove in the small of the back that saved his life.

Illya Kuryakin sprawled. The kris flew past the spot where his neck had been. Its tip nicked Solo's chin. He jerked back, stumbled against the cage bars. All over the station guns were blasting, men were shouting.

Chandra shook his head like some enraged animal. He came charging in at Solo again, kris slash-slashing back and forth through the air. Solo was caught up against the cage. *Slash-slash*, the blade arced at his face–

Diving, Solo rolled over. He seized Illya's machine pistol from the dazed agent's hands. Illya fought feebly, not really understanding what was happening as Napoleon Solo rolled away again.

Chandra was directly over him now, the kris held back over his head. Chandra let out a scream of anger and brought the blade flashing over and down in the split second that Solo got braced into position on his back and left elbow and let loose with the machine pistol.

Twisting, literally jumping from the impact of the bullets, Mr. Chandra crashed back inside the cage. Bullet holes sewed dark red little periods across the soiled bosom of his long linen coat. Dying on his feet, he disappeared into the cage's gloom-thick interior.

"Here's a hand," Solo panted, stumbling up. Illya Kuryakin didn't take it.

Solo stared down past his fingertips, saw a scarlet seep spreading under Illya's hair. Quickly he knelt. He inserted his fingers between head and ground, discovered the medium sized rock protruding up from the earth. Illya's skull had crashed against it.

He's got to have help.

Solo started to run into the darkness. He bumped into men who seized him, spun him around before he could raise his machine pistol. A hand came chopping at his throat, was pulled away suddenly.

"Hey! This is a Section II man! Solo, isn't it?"

"Right. Kuryakin's lying over by that light. He needs medical aid. He smashed the back of his head."

One of the three U.N.C.L.E. operatives in the group rapped out an order: "You go find Pfolkerstone, Miller. He should be over by the landing strip. I think he fetched his medical kit along. Maybe he can give–"

Suddenly a double beam of light washed over them. An engine growled. Solo whipped around, realizing he'd encountered the group right at the edge of a curving road from the motor pool.

The road arrowed toward the jungle. It was in this direction that the heavy, stake-bed truck was racing now, whipping past them in a rush of fumes and screaming heavy-duty tires.

As the truck went by Solo saw a sweat-dripping face limned at the window on the driver's side. Feverish eyes, a wind-whipped wisp of goatee–all this registered in split seconds. Solo remembered pictures he'd seen.

Dantez Edmonds.

Solo hurled himself at the truck, leaped into the air as it careened around a bend. His right hand caught the rim of the open window, then his

left. He hung from the side of the speeding truck as Edmonds shrieked and pounded at his fingers with a free fist.

The truck swerved from side to side. Solo heard a fiendish chittering of monkeys from the back. Edmonds beat at his hands furiously. Then abruptly, he stopped. Solo knew he was going to fall off. The truck was picking up speed, hurtling ahead to the point where two concrete barracks buildings flanked the road. Beyond them lay rain forest.

Edmonds drove with his left hand, bringing his right up and over. The muzzle of a pistol pointed through the window at Solo's face.

Edmonds screamed obscenities as he tightened his finger on the trigger. Solo let loose with his right hand, drove a feeble punch up through the window, felt it graze Edmonds' head.

Edmonds shrieked, fired. The bullet hit the upper edge of the open window, spanged away harmlessly as Solo dropped off and hit the earth with jarring force, rolling over and over. He tried to rise. Blackness swam at the edges of his eyes. There was a red thunder–

Solo twisted around. A fireball gouted up from the truck's hood. Edmonds had gone out of control, rammed the truck into one of the concrete blockhouses, probably as a result of Solo's punch. Edmonds' spindly figure came tumbling out of the cab.

From the truck's telescoped rear stake-bed, monkeys jumped chittering as their stacked up cages crumpled and burst. Edmonds went to one knee, his hair smoldering. He sawed the air with supple-fingered hands, like a demented symphonic conductor, trying to fend off the animals.

The first of the monkeys leaped in past his guard, went for his exposed neck and bit. Others, crazed like the first, darted in and bit for his hands. The monkeys crowded around Dantez Edmonds, chittering, chittering, biting, biting–

There was a single inhuman scream. Then there was silence.

The monkeys continued to crawl over the body, worrying it. Sickened, Napoleon Solo turned away. He went staggering into the pandemonium to round up the U.N.C.L.E. agents and organize them.

He met one of them near the motor pool. The man was grinning and holding a rifle on three Thrushmen who stood with hands raised over their heads. The gunfire was diminishing.

Solo opened his mouth to greet the other agent. He wanted to find out whether Illya had been turned over to the trader for first aid. Before he

could utter so much as a single syllable, Purjipur and all the rest of the earth went into a spin, and he blacked out.

Four

Ice tinkled gently in the tall frosted glass in Napoleon Solo's right hand. Wearing an immaculate jacket and slacks and seated in a high-backed bamboo chair in the air-conditioned hotel cocktail lounge, he looked only a little worse for wear.

His wrist displayed a thick bandage. There were smaller pieces of bandage at various places on his face. But he managed to smile.

"You look very fetching for a girl who went through all that you did," he said.

Across from him, very fetching indeed in a pale frock of lime-colored linen, Indra Bal smiled wanly in return.

Past her shoulder Solo could see through the slatted blinds of the lounge into a sun-drenched street of Purjipur's capitol. A tank rumbled by. Another. But slowly. In the past forty-eight hours since Solo wakened in the hospital helicopter, the plague attacks had dropped off sharply.

Most of the infected monkeys had disappeared into the rain forest. Hospitals were caring for the dying and hoping for word from the U.S. The war had blown itself out, once Solo and Illya had exposed THRUSH's calculated role in it. A search back at the jungle post had revealed files outlining the whole THRUSH plot.

"So I look fetching, do I?" Indra answered tartly. "I wonder if I should accept that compliment."

"Why not?"

"Out here, men like you are sometimes called colonialists. Not to be trusted."

"Rubbish! That's an idea spread by THRUSH malcontents. What I want for the moment is peace, more peace, and plenty of quiet." Solo lifted his glass. "Drink to that?"

"I'm ashamed of myself, Napoleon."

"In heaven's name why?"

"Trying to joke with you. This is really not the time for it. Your chief is–"

"Yes." Solo's face turned grave. He sighed, "Forgive me. It's just that if I think about Mr. Waverly still lying there in the hospital, I'll probably go stark staring–"

Suddenly there was a rush of warm air into the purple dimness.

Illya Kuryakin came running in. The top of his head was circled round and round with a bandage, a sort of semi-mummy effect. He raced up to the table.

“They’ve done it!”

“You mean found the antidote?” Solo asked.

“Exactly. The technical people came through two hours ago. As someone remarked earlier, they knew they could isolate the antidote if they had enough time. Well, the first of the serum arrived at Kennedy Airport from the Isle de Mal at noon. Mr. Waverly has just had his first injection and–”

“You’ve been talking to New York?”

“On Channel D, yes. Mr. Waverly is responding well, I’m delighted to report.”

The tension broke. Napoleon Solo pinched the bridge of his nose, laughing.

“The tough old stallion. They’ll never kill him.”

“He was one of the lucky ones,” Indra Bal said. “With the stamina to resist.”

Solo nodded. “A lot of them just couldn’t hold on. Like Plympton,”

Illya said quietly, “Well, our maniacal friend from the past came as close as anyone ever has to killing Mr. Waverly.”

“And some of his little pets are still roaming,” Solo brooded.

Indra spoke up: “You forget. Our government’s agricultural department is recruiting special teams of young men to beat the jungles near the villages. The monkeys are not native to Purjipur, you know. They can be spotted very easily. And there are only half a dozen alive. Those which are will be shot. So long as they are kept from the cities, the worst is over.”

“And,” Illya Kuryakin added, “there will be plane loads of the antidote on the way here soon. All the big pharmaceutical companies are going on a crash production schedule to manufacture it in quantity, according to the formula the Isle de Mal technologists worked out.”

Another tank rumbled by outside. Solo reached for his frosted glass. “Well. At last we can, as the saying goes–” He toasted Indra. “Enjoy, enjoy!”

Illya scowled. “Isn’t anyone going to invite me to sit down?”

Solo gave Indra a rather wicked leer. “My dear, I was under the impression this was to be a private party.”

Indra Bal flushed. “I certainly wouldn’t want to be the one to spoil a friendship–”

A trace of Solo’s old rakish grin came back as he said to Illya. “*Definitely* a private party.”

“As usual.” Illya sniffed. “Very well, Don Juan. Carry on. I promised to buy old P.C. Pfolkerstone a toddy anyway. He’s hanging around the lobby somewhere. He said he had plenty of anecdotes about his days as a hunting guide.”

But Illya looked as though he didn’t precisely think the amusing anecdotes were going to be all that amusing.

Napoleon Solo was already turning away. “I’m sure you’ll find it very educational.”

And, slipping one arm around Indra Bal’s shoulder, he leaned close.